Review of “Later Derrida: Reading the Recent Work”

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Herman Rapaport’s latest book is an uneven collection comprising 4 related but self-standing chapters on Derrida’s recent work. Chapter 1 and chapter 3 had previously appeared in *Diacritics* in 1995 and 1998, respectively, the other two chapters are new. The different destinations mark a difference in tone among the different sections. The chapters that were originally published in *Diacritics* are written in the typically compressed, and often allusive, style characteristic of a highly specialized journal in critical theory that can count on a sophisticated readership. The new material, instead, follows the more relaxed conventions of book publishing: the chapters are longer, more detailed and, generally speaking, more discursive in tone. The last chapter, however, seems to have been rushed to the press at the very last moment: it contains several typos (otherwise absent), and a quite puzzling, *verbatim* repetition of a full page-long paragraph (p. 114 and p.117: “Second, if Heidegger attacks...he may have wanted to stay with this insight”). Lastly, the title of the book may be slightly misleading. “Later Derrida” may prompt the reader to mistake Rapaport’s book for a rather general and compact introduction to the Derrida’s work after the so-called “ethical turn” of the 1980s. As the subtitle suggests, Rapaport is more interested in engagement than exegesis.

The main line of this rich and composite book is constituted by an analysis of the ethical implications of Derrida’s later work. In keeping with deconstruction’s favorite style, “ethical implications” must be understood in the sense of the analysis of the often aporetic structure of the most fundamental concepts of ethics, and not in the sense of developing a normative ethics or inquiring about the formal structure of a possible ethical system. Thus, large space is devoted to “responsibility,” “justice,” “hospitality,” “community (*Gemeinschaft*),” “identity,” etc., all concepts that have been at the center of Derrida’s recent interests, as well as to “agency,” “freedom,” “action,” themes that we usually associate with the existentialist tradition that originated with Sartre and early Heidegger. Considering that deconstruction has been considered as one of the most decisive and violent oppositions to existentialism and all the other forms of “anthropologisms” (a term used by Derrida himself in 1972), the critical confrontation lying at the center of Rapaport’s book could be rather startling. In fact, it is one of the merits of the book to bring to the forefront the unsettling proximity between deconstruction and its allegedly “surpassed” traditions, and to ask whether Derrida’s later work has recanted on his more radical, earlier positions; whether the received view of deconstruction does indeed do justice to a complexity that had perhaps always been there but went unnoticed in the canonization of the school; or whether, finally, the later “ethical” turn represents a genuine development of deconstruction’s earlier themes that, under the powerful influence of Levinas and Blanchot, bends its potentialities into one possible direction.
while leaving aside alternative possibilities. While I lean toward the last view, Rapaport seems to favor the second one. The interest of the book, however, does not lie so much in the final judgment, which may well be left to the reader, but to the analytic work that brings to the fore such antagonistic positions.

Indeed, Rapaport’s analysis proceeds, most often, _per via negativa_. Each chapter sets up a confrontation between Derrida’s recent work and the contradictory positions stemming from different traditions, eras, or selves. The first chapter, “Deconstruction’s Other,” explores the possibility of a “deconstructive” agency and political action by comparing the work of Derrida with Trinh Min-Ha’s—a thinker who has uninhibitedly reappropriated the metaphysical concepts and modes thought to be anathema to deconstruction. Similarly, the second, longest, and strongest chapter, titled “Monolingualism and Literature,” is built around a seemingly bizarre comparison between Derrida’s conceptions of literature and Frye’s. It stakes out quite clearly the import of Derrida’s “ethical turn:” nothing less than a complex, deep, and at times, puzzling rethinking of man’s relationship with the world and what lies beyond (or behind/beneath) it. The third chapter, “Archive Trauma,” is partly an exception, in its almost single-minded dedication to just one text, Derrida’s “Archive Fever.” The narrowness of scope does not translate into depth, however. The short chapter contains a myriad suggestions and variations on the themes of “trauma” and “archive” that at times seem to be held together by little more than the virtuosity of the writer. The last chapter, “Subjectivities,” focusses on a most pointed confrontation: Derrida’s recent positive take on early Heidegger and, more generally on existentialism, with his rather critical (and now, almost canonical) interpretations of the 60s and 70s.

The first chapter’s discussion of Derrida’s and Trinh Minh-ha’s relationships to metaphysics sets the stage for the chapters to come. It announces the crucial concept that runs like a red thread through the whole constellation of Derrida’s later works, and most particularly in its relationship to the Western tradition: _passivity_. This emphasis may come as a surprise to readers mostly acquainted with Derrida’s earlier work. Deconstruction’s relation to metaphysics, and more specifically to metaphysical concepts like “freedom,” “agency,” “human essence,” not to speak of “human rights,” “subject,” etc. was marked by a violent confrontation that employed a strategy of “reversal and displacement”(10) that has now become canonical. Derrida’s readings of many classical texts (Plato’s, Freud’s, Hegel’s, Rousseau’s, but also Lévi-Strauss’s and Foucault’s) showed how they were built around a strategic, hierarchical opposition (like the paradigmatic speech/writing), that nonetheless contained within itself the seeds of its own undoing. The patient work of the analyst would show how the opposition could be “reversed.” Speech, for example, was shown to be derivative upon writing, in the classical analysis of Derrida’s “Signature Event Context”. The very possibility of establishing a clear-cut distinction was “displaced”: it was shown to be rigorously untenable and indeed subject to a continuous shift modulated by complex negotiations. The overall strategy of deconstruction was thus marked by a resolutely “violent” approach to the Western texts and tradition. Such shock was perhaps most acutely felt in the language and style both of the early Derrida and especially of his early American followers—later known as the “boa deconstructors.” The implications of the “reverse and displace” approach are effectively played out in a passage from Derrida’s “Ends of Man” that Rapaport sums up quite aptly: “the critic stands at once within and outside of a metaphysical structure and _makes it tremble until it ruptures_”(11, emph. added).

Trinh Minh-ha's strategy couldn’t be more different; or so it seems. On the one hand, her work
Rapaport discusses *Woman, Native, Other*) makes abundant use of categories that deconstruction would have thought discredited, or rather “reversed and displaced.” Her account of the villagers telling stories in the marketplace is narrated with a naive pathos and melodramatic fervor that seem miles apart from the patient, rigorous analysis of the deconstructionist’s text. Her description of a primordial, unspoken, and markedly monolingual “house of language” in which the villagers dwell and which makes the telling and retelling possible, seems ready made for reversal and displacement. Yet, to remain within the same textual fragment, Minh-ha’s emphasis on the impossibility to “totalize” a story that “appears bottomless and headless for it is built on differences,” seems to provide a counterpoint to deconstruction’s accent on the constantly shifting boundaries of meaning and meaning-producing practices, with its repeated insistence on play, difference, trembling, and so forth.

Rapaport suggests that Trinh Minh-ha's relationship to deconstruction, her acceptance of its critical practices along with her simultaneous refusal to reject alternative approaches among which are the very practices that deconstruction deconstructs, represent a possible alternative development for this line of thought. “Trinh channels or directs deconstruction--says Rapaport--to a destination to which it has not been disposed to go.” (10). Trinh Min-ha thus becomes “Deconstruction’s Other.” But Rapaport’s suggestion would only remain an interesting thought, if it weren’t for the next, crucial step of his argument: it turns out that later Derrida’s practices and definitions of deconstruction share some interesting traits with Trinh Minh-ha’s. So much so, that Derrida himself may have become his own Other.

Rapaport finds a marked continuity in Derrida’s recent emphasis on deconstruction not as a militant event to be pursued, triggered, and exploited, but as something that happens. The evenementiality of deconstruction does not belong to a contradictory strategy, to use the terminology of Laclau and Mouffe exploited by Rapaport. “Deconstruction takes place,” --Derrida affirms in the fragment from the “Letter to a Japanese Friend” Rapaport quotes --it is an event that does not await deliberation, consciousness, or organization of a subject, or even of modernity.” Derrida uses the word “event,” but the passage makes clear that this “event,” marked by the appropriating event of Heideggerian origin, is not produced by the subject, the community, or the group. Rather, insofar as it takes place, it ad-vient, it comes to (us, here), before and beyond the individual’s acts and operations from which it differs. It is clear that the non act-like event that deconstruction is (or has become), is quite at odds with the rhetorical apparatus of production, dislocation, breakage, and rupture we mentioned above. Higher than issues of coherence, though, stand the consequences of this approach. If “deconstruction deconstructs it-self,” as Derrida proclaims in the quoted text, a radical opposition to metaphysics and its conceptual apparatus is no longer possible. No real contradiction (in the classical Hegel-Marxian sense) can be envisaged between the two because, to a larger extent, metaphysics and deconstruction inhabit each other. Consequently, the critical attitude--and all political and ethical stances informed by it-- must be open to a double possibility. First, deconstructive practices and insights may become one possibility among many, to be freely used and disposed of in a postmodern work of theoretical collage. Second, among the many elements to be pasted up on the board, classical conceptions of subjectivity, agency, homeliness/community (i.e. Gemeinschaft) may once again become first-class citizens. This conclusion sounds disparaging for the now forgotten radicality of the deconstructive approach, because it oscillates between two equally unpalatable outcomes. Either deconstruction is one of the many toys to be used in a postmodern jubilatory game of Nietzschean affirmation (to use Lyotard’s well-known image), in
which case its value is to be determined on the basis of its strategic relevance to a pre-determined goal, contra its declared un-actlike or un-operational-like features; or the critical viability of deconstruction, its disruptive charge, so to speak, must be made dependent, paradoxically enough, upon the definitive abandonment of the very notion of “critical stance.” A self-deconstructing deconstruction, to put it differently, reaches its most critical and its most anti-metaphysical point, when it shows the intrinsic limitations of the conception of critique, and it shifts to a different paradigm which, as Rapaport suggests, “does not merely recuperate metaphysics as the antithesis to deconstruction, but, instead, abandons the difference as a kind of ridiculous test or bad dependency” (22). It may be true, as Rapaport asserts in closing the chapter, that the fact “that metaphysics may abide in the releasement of deconstruction’s undecidable aporias is not necessarily to be seen as a victory for metaphysics and a defeat for deconstruction, but as an overcoming or surpassing” of both (ib.) But what about this “surpassing”? Is it a Heideggerian Verwindung? a Aufhebung? a relève? The great proximity between Derrida’s later thought and the very same classical models that it had supposedly displaced comes here to the fore. In other words, the truth of Rapaport’s assertion about a post-metaphysical appropriation of metaphysics hangs on a more precise articulation of that “surpassing” and the theoretical horizon that makes its articulation possible. Where to find the clues toward such horizon?

The abandonment of the classically conceived critical stance, the relinquishment of a contradictory strategy, the acceptance of a metaphysics that is no longer exclusively such (insofar as it is no longer the antithesis of its other), the releasement of the intrinsically violent displacing strategy. Such semantic chain points unequivocally toward the crucial element of Derrida’s later work: a notion of passivity that inhabits deconstruction and which is less indebted to Heidegger’s Gelassenheit than to Blanchot’s idea of a radical passivity standing beyond any active/passive opposition. Indeed, the destiny of deconstruction and its most recent incarnations seems to be strictly tied to the analysis of the passive relation—to a full articulation of all its participants, its movement of giving and gifting, its ultimate horizon of praxis.

Since a whole constellation of terms related to passivity inhabits Derrida’s later work (not to speak of the works of several affine thinkers like Nancy, Blanchot, Lévinas, etc.), one may think the issue is inexorably vague when stated in these general terms. How many times have we encountered “hospitality,” “desoeuvrement,” “passion”? To herald the need for a thorough commitment to passivity in view of an engagement with Derrida’s recent works may seem equivalent to the tautological affirmation according to which, in order to understand him, we need to read his works. On the contrary, it must be ascribed to Rapaport’s merit that he clearly indicates the problem’s historical and theoretical compass. Chronologically, we shall look at the mid-40s-early 50s, the years following the first wide diffusion of Heidegger’s Being and Time in France that saw its diverse appropriations, on the unifying background of Hegel’s phenomenology, by Sartre and the other existentialists, on the one hand, and by Bataille and his associates on the other. Theoretically speaking, the fundamental issue revolves on the debate about the redefinition of a subject that was defined on the basis of its capability for action (or its “negating/nihilating” power) and faces the possibility of its own disappearance when the realm of historical action has come to a closure. To put it somewhat differently, the theoretical knot lies in the complex debate around existentialism and its definition of the subject as the subject of (political and ethical) “action.” It may be trivial to recall that the activity of the subject is inexorably bound to the passivity of the “matter” its actions will negate and transform. However, the activity/passivity couple thus postulated leaves open the
possibility that a more radical form of passivity, not dependent upon anyone’s activity, may burst onto the scene. It could be interpreted as the semi-transcendental horizon of possibility of the activity/passivity couple, as in Levinas; or as the necessary outcome of the historico-political situation in which the possibility of historical action has been exhausted (as, in different forms, in Bataille, Blanchot, and Kojève). In any case, the analysis of passivity must begin with the analysis of the conditions of possibility of action, and the latter must take its start from the figures and issues that lie at its origin: Sartre, Heidegger, Bataille, and the likes. Thus, it is not surprising to see Derrida fully engaged with these themes in his recent writings--although many of his fellow travelers may be startled, as Rapaport correctly points out, to see him profess such an interest, given the previous excommunications of existentialism and its contemporary brethren as different forms of irremediably tainted anthropologism.

It is much to Rapaport’s credit that the last section of his book points in the right direction. Not only is it mostly devoted to an examination of the Derrida/Heidegger relationship--his analysis starts from Derrida’s “Ends of Man,” the 1972 essay that engages the whole complex problematic of action, recognition, and humanism in Sartre and French Hegelianism. He is to be commended as well for bringing Bataille’s take on existentialism into the debate, since I believe it is fair to say that most of the post-1960 quarrels, including those in which Derrida participated directly (for example in “The Ends of Man”) were to a large extent reenactments of the debates between Sartre and the “other Hegelians” that took place 20 years earlier. One voice, however, is remarkably absent from the discussion: Kojève’s. Rapaport quotes a crucial passage from an essay in *Critique* in which Bataille remarks that Heidegger’s “intense inquiries into *l’être* negates *l’existence* and that the philosophical interest in Being is the intentional ruination of the metaphysics of existence” (109). Bataille adds that such a metaphysics had been developed with far more reaching radicality by Hegel. Rapaport fails to note, however, that Bataille’s critique of Heidegger is really Kojève’s. In a number of texts written between the mid 1930s and the early 60s, including some passages in the *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, Kojève repeats that if Heidegger’s concern with death brings him quite close to Hegel, his lack of attention to the negating features of action, i.e. to struggle and labor (*lutte et travail*) makes impossible any account of concrete, historically determined existence. In the unpublished section of a 1936 review to Delp’s *Tragische Existenz* (recently published by B. Hesbois and anticipated by D. Auffret in his biography), Kojève (to whom Bataille was quite close from the late 30s on) repeats the point in words remarkably similar to those of the *Critique* essay. Heidegger’s anthropology, he says, “ne peut mener qu’à une ontologie de l’être naturel qui ne rendrait plus compte des réalités/vérités humaines existentielles que Heidegger voudrait analyser dans leur être même.” (see D. Auffret, *Alexandre Kojève*, Paris, Grasset, 1990, p. 384, and *Revue Descartes*, 7, 1993 for the complete text).

What is at stake here exceeds, I believe, an academic issue of attributions. Since the end of the 1930s, Bataille and Kojève were engaged in a close debate about the possibilities left open by the “Hegelian” (but really *Kojèvian*) end of historical action. Since a human being can only be properly characterized, for Kojève, by the “struggle and labor” that negates the given natural world and replaces it with a historical one, the question arises of what happens to human beings if and when the possibilities for historical action are, as Kojève and his students and friends believed, utterly exhausted. The issue is how to deal with a situation in which activity, in the strong sense, is no longer possible. To put it differently, the issue is whether the end of activity will only leave room for its converse, passivity; whether the end of activity will also mean the end of passivity and the
discovery of a new praxical horizon that goes beyond it; or again if there is a form of activity that
can be salvaged in the absence of any (natural or historical) material to operate upon; or, finally, if
the end of action can be postponed indefinitely and the natural-historical world will forever provide
human beings with material to be negated and transformed by their struggles and labor. It would be
easy to identify the main actors of the period with all these positions, and some are recalled by
Rapaport himself, although quite obliquely. It may not be useless to recall Kojève’s criticisms,
though. If early Sartre’s never ending dialectics of objectifications is an example of bad infinity that
negates the very conditions of its possibility, because it contradicts the historical dynamics that it is
supposed to instantiate, Bataille’s search for a “negativity without use” (the “négativité sans
emploi” typified by Bataille’s inner experience and its related phenomena of laughter, eroticism,
and play) will necessarily end up in mysticism. As all mystics, Kojève will argue, Bataille will also
end up in silence, or, as he prefers to say, in those forms of self-contradictory discourse which are
so many ways of expressing the Nothing within a community devoted to its custody. Kojève’s
alternative (which articulates itself in many variants over the years) is well-known: the end of action
that will happen when historical possibilities are exhausted will see universally recognized citizens
of the universal state revert to a “passive” condition where everything is “out in the open.” The sage
knows that he knows everything and therefore is perfectly satisfied and can devote himself to
formalist make-believe (snobbery) or innocent games: he can play with the socially constructed
roles and objects because they can no longer be appropriated as tools toward historical action.

The conflict between different understandings of passivity and their correlated social formations (i.e.
*Gemeinschaft vs. Gesellschaft*) we briefly sketched above, takes center stage in the section of
Rapaport’s book dedicated to a discussion of Derrida’s analysis of monolinguism, literature, and
responsibility. Rapaport starts with a long discussion of Frye’s theory of literature and concludes
that Frye more or less showed that literature is the expression of *Gemeinschaft*--of that pre-industrial
*Gemeinschaft* that was already waning in Shakespeare’s times and which is therefore what is most
foreign to us, given that “the world in which we live finds very little resemblance to that in which
myth and, later, literature threw down their roots.” (45) Frye’s monolingual archetypalism seems
quite an odd bedfellow for Derrida, long heralded as the prophet of difference and deferral. Yet
Rapaport’s analysis of recent Derridean texts shows that if one could certainly read the early attacks
on voice, speech, etc., as many attacks on monolinguism, it is indeed “to some form of
*Gemeinschaft* that Derrida would return to from the hither side of deconstruction” (53). For Derrida,
literature may not be the collection of archetypes so dear to Frye, but it becomes the setting up of a
mise-en-scène in which the same logic is always repeated: “the giving of the gift that reveals the
undecidable and incalculable relation/nonrelation of donor and recipient” (ib.). Literature, to put it
somewhat crudely, is a form of passion in the religious sense, i.e. “what sets a person apart and
makes the person exceptional as the precondition for returning and rededicating oneself to others“
(54) by the giving of the testimony. It is a response, however, that will always leave something out.
In literature, Derrida will more or less say, “il y a du secret,’ Or better: literature is the “il y a là du
secret,” the mise-en-scène that allows “le secret” to play itself out. Thus *Gemeinschaft* and
monolinguism return--not as the universal language of Frye’s archetypal-universal- pre-medieval
community, but as a plurality of such communities. Rapaport concludes that “we cannot simply
reject monolinguism outright for political reasons having to do with diversity, because the
monolinguism operates, in any case, where testimony is given or works of arts are advanced, since
they obey a law of exceptionality. Moreover, it is the monolingual moment that in its exceptionality
(its otherness) requires one to make a decision on committing to a community or not on the basis of
some kind of faith” (73). No matter how fascinating Rapaport’s articulation of Derrida’s return to monolinguisim “from the hither side of deconstruction” is, one wonders if there isn’t a strong sense of déjà vu to the whole, and indeed quite complex theoretical dynamic. Derrida’s deconstructive monolinguisim, and his accents on community/Gemeinschaft, presents so many similarities to Bataille’s position that one may be tempted to ask if Kojève’s critical point about its necessarily mystic (and therefore silent) outcomes are not applicable to Derrida as well. With the difference, perhaps, that instead of Bataille’s unilateral mysticism we are now presented with a mystical merry-go-round where we all take turns, our separate communities and with a logic and timeliness of our own, at playing (silent) witnessing-mystic and revealing-concealing God.

Be it as it may, it seems to me that the major impasse of Rapaport’s discussion is to avoid raising this issue. To be fair, the situation really reflects an impasse (or a lack of engagement) in Derrida’s later thought: the lack of an extended confrontation with the extreme “Hegelianism” that had been the necessary counterpart to so many of Derrida’s inspirers, from Bataille, to Blanchot, to Levinas and that is still at work, often unrecognized, in so many strands of French contemporary thought.

To conclude, this rich book by Rapaport, by engaging directly some of the thorny issues raised by Derrida’s ethical turn, makes a welcome addition to the contemporary philosophical debate and will certainly stimulate reflection in many readers, as it did with the present reviewer.

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