

**Derek Attridge, 2010. Reading and
Responsibility: Deconstruction's Traces
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**Paweł Wojtas
Lingwistyczna Szkoła Wyższa, Warsaw**

Deconstruction is now all but a relic of the past! Many a conservatively trained scholar would surely breathe a sigh of relief upon hearing this affirmation. One might hazard the thought that the more forcefully deconstruction managed to anchor itself in the intellectual and cultural life throughout its fat years between the 1970s and the late 1980s – with the ranks of its acolytes counting uncontested intellectual giants – the more persistently its antagonists dismissed it as a sort of inconsequential flannel. If indeed the golden age of deconstruction is far behind, it seems timely and justified to recapitulate Derrida's problematic place and legacy. Derek Attridge in his *Reading and Responsibility: Deconstruction's Traces* attempts to do just that.

The key premise upon which this book is founded is that certain problems posed by deconstruction have not yet been fully grasped. This flies in the face of more recent intellectual and cultural trends willing to assert that deconstruction has exhausted itself, never to return in any shape or form. But, as Attridge would have it, spectres of deconstruction are still looming large on the intellectual horizon. And the author has clearly done his homework to prove his point.

Composed of eleven chapters, the book under review is a compilation of previously published papers, contributions to journals, and collections (spanning from 1991 to 2009) tracing both key and rather scarcely researched aspects of Jacques Derrida's work. Attridge engages in discussions aimed at anchoring the place and function of deconstruction

today – both as an academic discipline and mode (or event) of reading – intermingled with an explication of certain concepts or problems rigorously interrogated by Derrida (e.g. philosophy, fiction, writing, law, ethics, to name but a few). Some readings of the works of Levinas, Barthes and J. Hillis Miller also complement the debate in question. If this sounds like a hoary old chestnut, indeed another book *about* deconstruction's chief concepts would be just too much of a good thing, the ways in which the author breathes life into the relatively extinguished deconstruction debate deserve due attention.

A Derrida reader will have knowledge of the philosopher's late shift from (post) structuralism (e.g. his trademark undoing of the conceptual strongholds of western metaphysics) to his later prolific phase of engagement in ethics, religion and politics. Much in the same vein, Attridge's critical output is marked by a turn from his dealing with aspects of language (e.g. his landmark *Peculiar Language* (1988), *Joyce Effects* (2000), *Me-ter and Meaning* (2003)), to an overtly ethical flavour of his more recent works (as in *Singularity of Literature* (2004), *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (2004), or the study under review). This shift is by no means clean-cut, as the aspects of language, literature and ethics unfailingly permeate the whole of the critic's oeuvre to varying degrees.

Attridge's 'ethical turn', if I may so put it, in his discussions on literature and philosophy can hardly be overstated. The critic – specialising in aesthetic theory, Derrida, Joyce and South African Literature – develops and promulgates a rewarding, if taxing, deconstructive reading method calling for the reader's responsibility towards the singularity of a text as the other. In keeping with a symptomatic Levinasian reasoning, Attridge equates the responsibility towards the text with the responsibility towards the (human) other: both necessitate irreducible hospitality, and generosity in the ethical encounter with the other. Hence, the author takes against instrumentalist reading, perhaps most forcefully in *The Singularity of Literature*, staking out a tactical reading mode that is upliftingly arduous to grasp, and thus possibly less vulnerable to maladroit imitation. Thankfully, Attridge does as he preaches: he glibly performs a first-hand deconstructive analysis, eschewing ham-handed emulation of Derridean jargon and stylistics (unlike Derrida, he is endlessly readable), and religiously snubs ersatz deconstructionism: a synthesis of Derrida's concepts seeking to reduce deconstruction to a uniform 'method' appropriated for the purposes of more dialectically and traditionally disposed minds. (Bad news for those who took *Reading and Responsibility for a Deconstruction for Dummies*).

To read deconstructively, that is to say, is to gesture towards indeterminacy of a target term or concept side-stepping affirmative, metatextual stances that risk encapsulating the text in an interpretative closure. Is it, however, to imply that deconstruction

shuns assertion? Although confirmatory gestures may be slyly circumvented in many a Derridean text, the act of affirmation should emerge as an effect (or event) of reading or language. Attridge seems to be painfully aware of such effects given that his language every now and then turns to itself: it dramatises the effects it discusses, hence allowing the doubling of terms to be sensed not only in the commentary it is conveyed by, but primarily in the tissue of language itself. When Attridge opens chapter three with a provocatively (mock?) affirmative declaration: “Derrida is hard to follow.” (51), he adopts playful Derridean stylistics to demonstrate this assertion. A move that makes evident that to follow Derrida in writing is to be unable to follow him in any other way than in and through language. Yet Attridge’s overall refusal to ape Derrida’s singular style upholds the opposite at one stroke: “if [my text] achieves inventiveness itself, it does justice to the inventiveness of these [Derridean] inventions” (52), rather than fawningly copying them. Elsewhere, elaborating on Derrida’s reading of the notion of the *secret*, Attridge abruptly halts his characteristically rigorous analysis to divulge resignedly: “At this point, I have to confess, I find myself at a loss.” (48). Again, to admit to the failure to understand Derrida is to allow language to do justice to the inexhaustibility of Derrida’s singular text: to affirm its *secret* without overt affirmation. Such (meta)textual energy saturates Attridgean rhetoric in a number of other instances.

Admirable also is the author’s tactical coupling of argumentative strengths and weaknesses. The critic seems to anticipate a limitation to an argument and puts it forward so as to render a weakness to his work as an asset, thus pre-empting possible criticism. Following this logic, for instance, he takes issue with Derrida’s unreadability only to recuperate it: “this capacity to put the norms of logical argument on trial is precisely what is valuable about the arts.” (5). At this point, however, I find Attridge’s handling of Derrida problematic. In the bulk of his study on Derrida – the publication under review marks the critic’s over forty-year-long scholarly engagement in deconstruction – Attridge is doggedly uncritical of Derrida’s output. (Even the author’s long cordial friendship with the philosopher can hardly serve to account for this quietism). As if to respond to Derrida’s text responsibly necessitated a refusal to read him sceptically. (This, ironically, runs counter to deconstruction’s key premise). If, however, this apostolic commitment to Derrida begs no explanation – as it justifiably may not – questionable is the manner in which Attridge substantiates his resolution:

Were Derrida still alive, I might have presented my reading of his reading of Levinas in a more critical spirit; I’m not sure. But Derrida cannot respond, cannot elaborate and

revise, and it seems to me that to do justice to his text one has to follow his example and read it for more than just the literal and logical arguments it presents (114).

Characteristically, and perhaps understandably, Attridge staunchly follows his own interpretative blueprint by asserting that to read responsibly, to do the text ultimate justice, to be hospitable and generous to the text – orphaned by its author who is no longer at hand to negotiate the text’s meanings – is to respond to its irreducible singularity. However, out of a host of critics and philosophers quoted by Attridge (who cannot “respond” either), only Derrida escapes unscathed. Full of reverence as Attridge may be to Levinas, Kierkegaard and Barthes (not to mention some living scholars for the sake of the passage under scrutiny, such as J. Hillis Miller or Martin Hägglund), the critic seems to have no qualms about pointing to deficiencies of their reasoning. (Is the forerunner of deconstruction perhaps exempt from the gravity of deconstruction when applied to his thought?) However, this charge might as well be overlooked given that the dedication note – “In memoriam / JD” – quite naturally enjoins a critical etiquette that trades customary academic lambasting for grandfatherly tribute.

Ultimately, this fails to belittle the book’s indisputable merits arising from the impressive scholarly erudition of its author and the diversity of disciplinary strings he pulls. Chapter 5, for instance, bears the marks of the critic’s earlier scholarly signature. Depending on the principle that “language is *techne*, technique, artifice” (81) Attridge persuasively argues – again under an emblematic Derridean veneer – that natural speech cannot renounce its inherent “jargoncity” in that it, much like ‘natural speech’, is constructed upon collective ideological, historical and cultural conditions of its users. Although jargon is cast to the margins of the standard as a dangerous supplement to ‘natural speech’, the critic meticulously reasons that collective language is always-already jargon before it is sanctified by culture as ‘natural’. Those no stranger to Attridge’s oeuvre will catch here the echo of his earlier work, *Peculiar Language*, where he militantly argues that the traditional ways of conceptualising language end up in self-contradictory explanatory accounts. Much like this unsettling of jargon-natural speech dichotomy, Attridge routinely subjects terms and notions to the discipline of doubling. Happily, the author resolves not to pander to re-hashing such well-worn Derridean concepts as centre, presence, supplement, etc. Playing upon the meaning of Barthesian notions of ‘obtuse’ and ‘punctum’ (blunt and acute) and reversing their binary opposition, Attridge studiously demonstrates that these terms, by inviting undecidability, rely on the codes they defy: they depend on their texture to communicate their condition, which the hermeneutic means fail to deliver.

In terms of structure, the chapters leapfrog alternately from language-related and literary to ethical aspects: the latter domain is unmistakably where we now find the author at his most robust. Arising out of studying Derrida and Levinas's debates is an insightful proposal that the relational self-other encounter is susceptible to the obligatory irruption of *the third* (illeity). Since no (human) one-to-one encounter can override linguistic communication, the third arrives as this mediatory language. Elsewhere, identifying Hillis Miller's double-bind of *zero* ((n)either a number (n)or non-number), as that "nothing that is" (136), Attridge argues that the text heavily depends on *irresponsibility* (this zero condition of responsibility) to equal measure in that it involves a "certain freedom" of the reader that is not entirely mediated by the text (135). In a similar debate, offering a rereading of the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac the author proposes that the necessity of ethics (ultimate responsibility) is defined by a "structural aporia" (irruption of the other, silence, undecidability) which belies its status if approached as a universalised discipline. As such ethics is an impossible venture that is always subject to redefinition in an encounter with a radical singularity of the other. Attridge's critical reading of Martin Hägglund's recent rereading of hospitality and radical atheism also makes for a longed-for charting of this yet unexhausted path of Derridean ethics, and the closing chapter – Attridge's interview with Jean-Michel Rabaté (an energetic commentator on deconstruction as well) – undertaking the mammoth task of registering the place of deconstruction against the backdrop of the contemporary cultural and academic transformations luminously rounds-up and compliments the study under review.

Deconstruction is a failure! It is furnished with metaphysical apparatuses that challenge metaphysical assumptions. It depends upon the material it vigorously resists. Deconstruction attempts the impossible: it relies on the impossible for its operation. But to deconstruct is to respond to this aporetic, impossible ethical demand: response that will, again, end in failure. *Reading and Responsibility* emerges undeterred by the anticipation of this failure: it is a most illuminating response to the singularity of the yet unfathomed complexity of Derridean thought.