

Simon Glendinning

Derrida: A Very Short Introduction.

Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011.

144 pages

\$11.95 (paper ISBN 978-0-19-280345-0)

In much of this slim yet dense volume, Simon Glendinning tracks Derrida's complex relationship with the philosophical tradition, underlining Derrida's aim 'to open the space for a new way of reading the philosophical heritage... to give it a future' (30). It is hard not to read Glendinning's writing as opening a similar space, inscribing possible futures for deconstruction within a discipline which remains decidedly antagonistic to Derrida's work. For Glendinning, Derrida is primarily a philosopher and his work, faithfully unfaithful, inhabits the philosophical tradition, aligning itself with that which has been habitually marginalised or overlooked. Derrida's adoption of the deconstructive process generated a 'violently hostile' (8) reaction and this hostility provides one of the starting points for Glendinning, who uses the so-called 'Cambridge Affair' of 1992 to consider what is challenging or radical in Derrida's work. His work, Glendinning informs us, begins from the question of how to write philosophy when 'writing philosophy has itself become a philosophical problem' (16).

The larger part of Glendinning's book addresses Derrida's response to this problem, before moving on to consider the ethical and political implications of Derrida's work. Following Derrida, Glendinning urges us to adopt a practice of careful, attentive reading in order to avoid resorting to 'inappropriate interpretive keys' (31). His own reading endeavours to introduce Derrida's complex theoretical framework through certain interconnected ideas. These include Derrida's rewriting of futurity, and the shift from a teleology rooted in a fixed conception of 'Man' to 'an inventive movement towards a future in which the very idea of the future is conceived in a radically new – and not so teleological – way' (39). This idea of a non-prescriptive futurity, underpinned by the temporality of *différance*, both informs Derrida's challenge to accepted notions of presence, agency, intentionality and identity, and shapes his idea of the 'democracy to come', a key focus of his later, more explicitly political work.

Glendinning effectively dispels certain myths about Derrida, for example the notion that his work lacks intellectual rigour or that it participates in the so-called 'linguistic turn'. Glendinning develops this point, outlining Derrida's reconceptualisation of writing – traditionally condemned to a 'fallen secondariness' (48) – as that which renders language and meaning possible. He demonstrates the centrality of this reconceptualisation to Derrida's work, as it grounds the idea of supplementarity and the critique of logocentrism. Here, Glendinning's Derrida is fresh and inventive, a figure who 'read[s] our time' (49). In two subsequent chapters, 'Différance' and 'Iterability', Glendinning explains Derrida's defence of writing, stressing the inevitability of dissemination and reiterating Derrida's claim that the characteristics of writing are evident in all signifying systems. Glendinning provides a clear and accurate account of the way that Derrida's reconceptualisation of writing anchors his entire theoretical framework as well as acknowledging the significance of 'writing-related' tropes when we 'reach for an articulation of deep structures of human life' (52). However, his analysis overlooks the ways in which, having reinterpreted 'writing' as the ground of meaning, Derrida's work proceeds to

explore the practice of writing itself. Derrida's experimentation with form, style, and genre in texts such as *Glas*, 'Envois' and 'Circumfession' both highlights the structure of 'writing' and suggests ways in which writing, particularly literary writing, might circumvent familiar logocentric pathways and provide a democratic space in which anything might be said.

In the latter portion of the book, Glendinning investigates the political implications of deconstruction, rejecting simplistic accounts of a 'turn' in Derrida's work and following Geoffrey Bennington in presenting a more nuanced account of the transition as 'a shift in emphasis from a focus on traditionally marginalized predicates to a focus on rather more traditionally central ones' (80). The political significance of deconstruction is much contested, with Terry Eagleton's 1980s dismissal of it as 'politically evasive' (*Literary Theory: An Introduction* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1983], 148) appearing reductive and inaccurate yet leaving deconstructive critics struggling to articulate deconstruction's acutely political sensibility without mistakenly aligning it with a fixed political agenda. In this area, Derrida has always been insistent, from his assertion as early as *Positions*, that 'Deconstruction... is not *neutral*. It *intervenes*' (*Positions*, tr. Alan Bass, 2nd edn. [London: Continuum, 2002], 76), to his rather more informative claims in the 1990s: 'Precisely because deconstruction has never been concerned with the contents alone of meaning, it must not be separable from this politico-institutional problematic, and has to require a new questioning about responsibility, an inquiry that should no longer necessarily rely on codes inherited from politics or ethics. Which is why, though too political for some, deconstruction can seem demobilizing in the eyes of those who recognize the political only with the help of prewar road signs' ('Mochlos', in *Logomachia: The Conflict of the Faculties*, ed. Richard Rand [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992], 1–34, at 23).

Alert to Derrida's challenge to conventional definitions of the 'political', Glendinning emphasises Derrida's pattern of 'argumentative reversal' (80), maintaining that it ensures the consistency of his work and illustrates its relationship with the philosophical tradition. In the later work, this pattern leads Derrida to ideas such as unlimited hospitality, 'impossible forgiveness' (81) and 'the impossible community' (82). This 'impossible community' proves the most fruitful of these for Glendinning, who focuses on the way Derrida recasts the idea of political community and lays bare the tensions inherent in democracy. Drawing out the impossible 'double injunction' between the need to attend to the singularity of the individual on one hand, and to calculate the happiness or wellbeing of the majority with the other, Glendinning shows how Derridean democracy is an interminable process, a constitutive fissure or 'open wound' (91) which cannot and should not be closed. This underscores Derrida's rejection of the idea of a 'historico-messianic vision' of the 'proper end of man' (96). Glendinning identifies Derrida's non-teleological account of the future and his retention of the 'emancipatory spirit' (97) of Marxism as a source of freedom and hope rather than despair, yet it remains unclear how we are to transform the abstractions of Derrida's work into meaningful political activity.

Demonstrating an acute awareness of current critical interest in Derrida's work, Glendinning devotes a chapter to Derrida's interest in 'the question of the animal'. Here he follows Derrida's navigation of the path between humanism and naturalism, perceiving his rejection of both poles as part of deconstructive dissatisfaction with 'the *logos*-centred idea of Man and the proper end of Man' (101). Part of releasing our grip on the idea that there is a '*truth*

of Man’ includes sacrificing the idea that we can find ‘*the truth of the Animal*’ (105); not to say that there are not objective differences between forms of life, but that these are always received and interpreted within a subjective framework. Derrida maintains that we should respond to the singularity of every living other, and in his account of non-human life (and elsewhere) he is clearly indebted to Emmanuel Levinas. The influence of Levinas and the question of the ethics of deconstruction were much-disputed in the 90s and 00s and here, despite his extensive discussion of politics and the political, Glendinning deftly avoids both, perhaps looking to liberate Derrida’s work and its political significance from these well-worn debates. However, Derrida’s writings depict the political as ever-interwined with the ethical and new accounts of this complex relationship, as of that between Derrida and Levinas, and of terms such as ‘alterity’ and ‘responsibility’ are long overdue. Similarly, some reference to Derrida’s increased engagement with religion and religious language would enhance Glendinning’s overview of the varied terrain of Derrida’s writing.

Glendinning’s book is dense and fast-paced; although extensive philosophical knowledge is not assumed, its readers are required to assimilate complex ideas at quite some speed and this in itself will be enough to deter some. However, Glendinning’s implied reader is perhaps not the philosophical novice, rather the curious student or scholar made wary by Derrida’s reputation and the hostility of the tradition. In this case, Glendinning’s clarity and rigour, his commitment to careful reading, and his skilful mediation between Derrida’s voluminous back-catalogue and the inexperienced reader will be sufficient to engage and stimulate new readers and new readings of Derrida’s work.

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