

**GEOFFREY BENNINGTON (2010) *NOT HALF NO
END: MILITANTLY MELANCHOLIC ESSAYS IN
MEMORY OF JACQUES DERRIDA*. EDINBURGH:
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Benjamin Noys

[T]he order comes down from a place that can be identified neither as a *living present* nor as the pure and simple *absence of someone dead*.
Jacques Derrida, 'Marx & Sons' (2008: 213)

The 'order' that animates Geoffrey Bennington's *Not Half, No End* (2010) appears precisely to come from 'the pure and simple absence of someone dead' – Jacques Derrida. This collection of pieces written, with one exception, since the death of Derrida in 2004, tries to continue *with* Derrida in all the pain and melancholia of his absence. For Bennington it was Derrida who was always the intended reader of his work, the one for whom his work was destined we might say. Of course, the question of destination and the dissemination of the destination preoccupied Derrida's own thinking (see Derrida 1987). The desire to have only one reader is always an opening to reading itself, and so to anyone reading. Hence Bennington's work of fidelity, his work of mourning – and, as we will see, Bennington is nothing if not a faithful reader of Derrida ('not half a faithful reader', we could say, to borrow his idiom) – has to also remain faithful to this opening, this dissemination, and to the dehiscence of life and death, of mourning and melancholia, of the 'living present' and 'pure and simple absence' that has preoccupied Derrida in his entire work.

This 'structure', in which Derrida is absolutely gone and yet lives on, is focused by Bennington through his constant invocation of Derrida's analysis of '*demi-deuil*' or, to use Bennington's phrase, 'half-mourning'. Freud argued that mourning involved a successful moving on by slowly de-cathecting the dead Other, and that

melancholia was a pathological internalisation and attachment to the dead Other. Derrida pointed out that any true recognition of the death of the Other might then be closer to melancholia than mourning in its continued attachment to the Other and refusal to forget. Yet, this form of melancholia is not simply the 'pathological' form, and the distinction between mourning and melancholia begins to blur. This is what Bennington calls 'militant melancholia', and it presupposes that we can't simply 'get over it'; in the callous everyday phrase used on those who display too ostentatious a grief. We could say that Bennington's aim, beyond his 'personal' experience of grief, is to insist that we can't get over the death of Derrida, or that we shouldn't get over that death. To place Derrida in the pantheon of philosophers, or to expel him as a foreign body, to locate his legacy, is to construct a teleology of forgetting that serves to neutralise the event of his thinking. In this way Bennington's recourse to the structure of an 'interrupted teleology', the necessary and intrinsic 'no end' of any movement, inscribes an incompleteness and rupture that forces us to constantly return to Derrida as an unfinished event.

The sickening jubilation that characterised some responses to Derrida's death, responses I wish neither to recall or reference, could be diagnosed in psychoanalytic terms as merely the flip-side of a melancholia repressed and denied.¹ This may be too generous in the case of those so-called critics or academics who never had anything to do with Derrida and were only too glad to declare his death an alibi for their own intellectual failings. The obscene rapidity with which Derrida and deconstruction were declared 'dead', a rapidity of declaration and desire that has always accompanied deconstruction from the beginning, suggests the desire to have done with Derrida and to 'bury' his work. In contrast, Bennington's 'militant melancholia' is a deliberate attachment that ethically and politically refuses this obscene sense of triumph. Of course, beyond the pathos that, unusually for Bennington's work, explicitly marks these texts, they also have to attest to the possibility of going on and of what this stubborn refusal to forget Derrida might mean.

The book is, therefore, not only a book of melancholic attachment. The very militancy of 'militant melancholia' suggests the necessity and drive to go on, and to justify the necessity of this going on beyond as the true fidelity to the friend. To continue after the death of Derrida is to raise the more general problem of continuing after Derrida. This is the problem posed by Derrida's capacity to register and answer objections to his work in advance, to construct a fidelity of reading that seems often to leave the reader with nothing more to

say. The very skill of Derrida's own reading and writing can close the possibility of welcoming the inventive and the new that Derrida insisted was the task of deconstruction. While Derrida's death may exacerbate this problem, or may calm it, the difficulty remains of how to continue with or after Derrida. The solutions to this problem have not, to my mind, been satisfactory. A simple forgetting of Derrida, a desire to have done with Derrida and get on with the 'real business', has been evident since the introduction of his work. In fact, the current moment of the humanities seems dominated by exactly that 'culturalist historicism' identified by Bennington as unable to come to terms with the 'Derrida event' (38). That said, the surplus or excess of Derrida's thought, perhaps condensed in his thinking of the event as always unforeseeable, has lent itself to an exegetical industry and an exegetical piety. In one sense this piety remains essential and necessary, considering how many still continue to get Derrida just plain wrong, and this is an animus that drives Bennington's oeuvre. Of course, the difficulty is that this necessary stabilisation and rigour becomes itself static and mechanical, which relates to Derrida's insistence that the event *qua* event can't be distinguished from a mechanical repetition.

Within the field of writing on Derrida this recently seems to have been answered with a turn to the 'creative' and inventive, in the sense of returning to these Derridean concepts, but also in a 'performative' sense. The rather wearisome, to me, claims to novelty and the new themselves become repetitive gestures that proclaim what they struggle to deliver. For this kind of deconstruction Derrida's novel *The Postcard* (1980 / 1987) is obviously the key text. In this 'fictionalisation' of Derrida the intransitive sense of 'writing' (to use Barthes's term) is made transitive to the 'creative'. The desire to push 'beyond' Derrida, to get Derrida working, then seems to all-too smoothly coincide with valorised forms of creative 'labour' at play in the institutions of contemporary academia. In either case, repetitive or 'creative', what remains the key problem or difficulty is any engagement with Derrida that both remains faithful to Derrida and departs from Derrida in any meaningful sense. Whether exposition or creation, whether getting Derrida finally right or invoking an inventive new 'Derrida', the institution of deconstruction appears, ironically, closed in on itself.

The solution that Bennington offers is certainly one that firmly remains 'within' Derrida's texts; in fact we could say it hyperbolises this involution. His suggestion of a truly faithful fidelity to Derrida, a hyper-fidelity if we like, is the necessity to interrupt the teleology of

Derrida's own oeuvre and constantly loop back to the early texts (xiii). It is by re-reading the early Derrida, Bennington claims, that we can 'open up' (xiii) his texts. In this way Bennington courts the deliberate paradox of his self-description as a 'Derridean fundamentalist' (112). To open up the texts depends on a fundamental fidelity to the texts, a search in the early works for the origin of everything Derrida will later unfold in his own iterative 'self-reading – a return with Derrida to displace Derrida, to inscribe oneself in a moment of origin and presence that is explicitly ruled out by the texts themselves (49).

This is, in a way, a crazy wager. Derrida, of course, has made much of the 'double bind' as the condition of reading and inheritance (Derrida, 1990). We are driven mad by Derrida. It is this task Bennington takes on, and he recounts that Derrida reproached him, after he had been criticising an account of Derrida's thought he regarded as over-simplifying, with being a 'rigorist puritan' (140). 'Fundamentalist', 'puritan', the religious language suggests, as an aside to the massive debate about Derrida and religion, a Protestantism of deconstruction. The problem remains, however, of what we might gain, or lose, from this rigour. To attend to the complexity at the origin implies a re-reading of Derrida, an iteration that, hopefully, alters (Derrida, 1988: 40).

This first effect of this return to origins is that it demands a periodisation to sustain the distinction between 'early' and 'late' Derrida. Rather audaciously Bennington suggests that this distinction might be marked by the death of Derrida's father in 1970, and the consequent emergence of mourning in his work (112). Leaving aside the biographical speculation, which bears consideration, the conceptual marking of the difference between the 'early' and 'late' Derrida lies in the particular forms of his strategy. In the early texts Bennington suggests that Derrida plays devalued terms against what metaphysics values ('writing' against 'speech'), while the later works retrieve metaphysical terms, such as presence and experience and affirm them (58-9). Of course, this 'tension' is programmed in the early work, as Bennington notes quoting *Writing and Difference* (1967): 'between writing as decentering and writing as affirmation of play, the hesitation is infinite' (116; Bennington's translation). We might say that the hesitation is resolved or displaced in the movement from 'writing as decentering' to 'writing as affirmation of play', in a certain *weighting* (in passing, we could ask about the 'turn' to affirmation occurring at the same time as the turn to mourning?). In another reading of this difference Bennington

suggests we pass from the 'early' Derrida as a thinker of 'complexity at the origin' to the 'late' Derrida as a thinker of the 'interminable ends', from 'deconstruction of *arkhè* to deconstruction of *telos*' (136).

There is another crucial inflection of this scansion and that is through the question of life. If the 'early' Derrida tends towards the rigorous deconstruction of the distinction between life and death, then the 'later' Derrida indicates a hesitating choice to take the side of life (59). Affirmation and 'Life' seems to come together and this suggests an unlikely 'vitalist' moment in the later Derrida. Of course, we could say that the continual emphasis of Derrida on the necessity of the mechanical to life precludes any Bergsonian-style opposition between 'Life' and the mechanical (Bergson, 2009). Yet, there still seems to be an inscription of the necessity of 'Life' as the opening to the event that aligns with a certain vitalist imperative. Even in Bennington's description of the 'early' Derrida's 'slightly mad exuberance' (130), we find the sense of excess and overflowing so thematically close to the affirmative and vitalist. Of course, this is a conceptual identification and guilt-by-association of terms that could extend nearly everywhere – one of the problems of vitalism between its own promiscuous excess that tends to find 'Life' everywhere, in the most unpropitious of places. That said, we can note this emergence of 'Life' and affirmation together as the traits of the 'late' Derrida.

The initial usefulness of this periodisation is, I'd argue, in explaining a difference in tone and strategy and, in my case, a preference for the 'early' Derrida. What we find in the 'early' Derrida is a neutrality of strategic analysis that undermines the terms of metaphysics. We might well add: does this also undermine the 'late' Derrida's attempt to affirm re-worked metaphysical concepts? I have been highly critical of the 'affirmationist' turn of recent contemporary theory and analysed Derrida as a 'weak affirmationist' (Noys, 2010: 23-50), Bennington's analysis offers a great deal of clarification and nuance to my deliberately blunt analysis. There is a difficulty as well for the placement of Bennington's work. On the one hand, he insists that everything is already (half) in the 'early' Derrida, and this seems to place him on the side of the 'early' Derrida. On the other hand, Bennington's own conceptual invention of 'interrupted teleology' seems to be placed firmly in the 'late' Derrida. Of course, much depends on how we read this looping effect. We could, for example, read it as a *purification* of the later Derrida – removing the Derridean analysis of 'ends' from an affirmative and vitalist

orientation. I think there is evidence that this is one of Bennington's intentions (by which I mean textual intentions, if not 'personal' intentions). In this way Bennington's own wider strategy would be a fidelity to the earlier Derrida as a means to grasp and inscribe the 'interrupted teleology' that marks the later Derrida.

It would also, of course, be possible to read the later Derrida in a more teleological way, ironically, as the emergence of this 'interrupted teleology' is only foreshadowed in the earlier work. In this case the ethico-political commitments to life *qua* opening would be a necessary supplement to ensure the interrupted and open teleology implicit in the earlier work. Again, it is possible to adduce textual evidence for this kind of claim in Bennington's reading. Of course, in typically deconstructive fashion, we could even argue that this kind of 'choice' is the true problem and the matter is more strictly undecidable. In this case the looping between early and late Derrida would be a 'spiral' that could not be closed or teased out into 'good' or 'bad' forms.

What remains is still the issue of remaining in this loop; however we decide to do so. For all the emphasis of Derrida on the opening, the unpredictable, and the event, we can seem to remain within the closure of his text, in which every question or problem is answered at the expense of the ability to add anymore. Bennington's choice to rigorously remain within Derrida's texts as the means to re-read them is impeccable. That said, I can't help but register a feeling of dissatisfaction. While all-too-often the attempt to jump out of Derrida's work leads to a simple falling short, we might wonder if such a fecund and exuberant thought might demonstrate its singularity and its ability to take the measure of alternative philosophical orientations more clearly. Bennington's detection of affirmative and vitalist tones in Derrida's work would certainly seem to open the necessity of analysing these in relation to those orientations – Deleuze being only the most obvious example here.² The absence of these indications gives this work something of the feeling of necessary preliminaries, but as there is 'no end' to this establishment of Derrida then the risk is we simply seem to fall back into Derrida as such.

To recall Derrida's own discussion of his difficulty in replying to his 'master' Foucault, do we remain already pre-empted by the internalised voice of the master or can we 'break the glass, or better the mirror, the reflection, his [or her] infinite speculation on the master. And start to speak' (Derrida, 1978: 32). If we can start to

speak, we could add, can we only speak of the master, of Derrida? Is Derrida worn here as a mask, to gain the space to say something else, to speak of interrupted teleology? What kind of interruptions might this then force on the field of the philosophical? A previous collection by Bennington was titled *Interrupting Derrida* (2000), suggesting the equivocal movement of fidelity and departure in the moment of interruption. To interrupt is also to speak, to cut across a discourse, to intervene. The difficulty remains, however, of what this intervention achieves. While the suggestion that there is more to be said and read of Derrida, and especially more of 'early' Derrida, is no doubt correct it is frustrating to feel that we still remain at the moment of starting or beginning to speak.

One way to inflect this problem – which remains faithful to Bennington's invocation of 'militancy', and his previous insistence on the political necessity of reading Derrida (Bennington, 1994) – is to consider the political stakes of this continuing interruption of Derrida. Obviously, as has been well established in the lengthy and vituperative debates concerning the 'politics of deconstruction', this political necessity is not simple or univocal. I would suggest that one way to read the political injunction I am invoking is as the necessity to trace and track the intervention Derrida's thought implies that cuts across the political and philosophical. What seems to be lacking in *Not Half, No End* is something of that incision, although future work is promised that will be more explicit on this point (see Bennington, 2008 for a preview). Of course, this suggestion can seem (or could be) the usual and endless political 'order' that is made to Derrida and deconstruction. On the one hand, this seems to leave the political as determinant, in a quite metaphysical fashion; on the other hand, it ignores the seemingly endless production of 'political' readings of Derrida (Cheah and Guerlac (eds.), 2009, for example).

In this case, however, I am suggesting something of the need to open beyond the closure of Derrida's text(s). Politics here figures the question of the philosophical or theoretical, in terms of the relations, alliances and antagonisms of Derrida's thought as it lives on in the present moment. It also figures the broader question, or problem, of how we might re-engage the 'militancy' of 'militant mourning' with the more usual political connotations of that word. There are, as usual, many continuing political 'uses' or deployments of Derrida and deconstruction, but what interests me is what a return to Derrida, and notably the early Derrida, might accomplish in this regard. Certainly, one striking feature of the 'early' work in light of

the current context of capitalist crisis is the emphasis on economy, work, and play. In this sense the iteration of Derrida will alter if we take seriously, i.e. critically, the punctual nature of Derrida's interventions and the context out of which they emerge and how they might extend 'into' our moment. This is not a call for contextual or historical reduction, but rather the on-going 'work' of rethinking demanded by and of the thought of Derrida. Such a re-opening will be political and will need to attend to the rigour with which Bennington has re-read Derrida.

Endnotes

¹ 'One of the ways in which hatred expresses itself in the situation of mourning is in feeling triumph over the dead person' (Klein, 1988: 354).

² Derrida makes some tantalisingly brief remarks on his relation to Deleuze in his obituary text 'I'm Going to Have to Wander All Alone' (Derrida, 2001: 189-196).

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