

**BENOÎT PEETERS (2013) *DERRIDA: A  
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**La sur-vie de Jacques Derrida: A Review Essay**

A biography is also constructed from obstacles and refusals, or, if you prefer, resistances. (Peeters, 2013: 5)

This concern for death, this awakening that keeps vigil over death, this conscience that looks death in the face is another name for freedom. (Derrida, 1995: 15)

The Derridean encounter has a way, it seems, of feeling necessarily, always already, belated. Certainly the later Derrida, who composed a body of work characterized by a prolific number of shorter books (or perhaps, rather, longer essays), work that responded to critical demands upon his diminishing time, leaves me with the feeling of belatedness. The texts feel belated upon their arrival, possessed of both an incredible energy and insufficiency. The gaps between thought, composition, writing (that dangerous supplement), and the received text – let alone the translated text – immediately push this reader's interactions with Derrida into such a position.

Derrida himself, of course, is also quick to acknowledge the situation of belatedness. My touchstone on this matter – though one might invoke others – is *Specters of Marx*, that key text that marks Derrida's clearest response to Marx. Derrida famously begins *Specters* by recalling the opening of the *Manifesto*: 'A specter is haunting Europe – the specter of Communism' (Marx and Engels, 1967: 78). The specter, Derrida notes, is in fact 'the *first noun* of the *Manifesto*' (1994: 4), and cannot be overlooked, and he proceeds to read this spectral invocation through the Ghost in *Hamlet*. Derrida uses this

opening to reflect upon the being of haunting – what he terms ‘hauntology’, punning on ontology – and the situation of the absent-present being that haunts not only Marx’s politics, but all of the politics that follow. The absent-presence of communism, and by extension of Marx, Derrida shows, is in fact precisely the project of Derridean deconstruction, let alone the *différance* that attends to any utterance, as well as the problem of the ‘hors-texte’ that readers encounter in *Of Grammatology* in particular (1997: 158). Derrida’s Marx, in his (repressed) return is also an embodied Marx. The physical Marx who is interred, he asserts, over and over again in critical commentary, is one who reveals the extent to which Marx himself cannot be buried: he lives on, brought back to bear upon politics every time that critics feel the need to declare Marxism dead. For Derrida, the specter is precisely the condition of possibility itself (1994: 12). And the many contradictions of Marx – Derrida cites Marx’s famous claim that he is not a Marxist (1994: 34) – provide the space for a politics founded upon the deconstructive *potentia* of the openness of the text.

The same challenge, or a version of it, now attends to Derrida himself, as he was well aware would become the case in *Specters* in his suggestion, *inter alia*, that he himself is not a Derridean. His recognition of his own textual, hauntological absent-presence pervades that work, as well as many of his late texts (Benoît Peeters suggests that questions of autobiography begin to enter Derrida’s writing after about 1991 [2013: 10]). How does one write about a thinker who provides such conceptual yet intimate obstacles to the writing of the self through the self’s own texts? How does one provide a way of thinking through a life lived and an intellectual endeavour that lives on or survives the life as such (*sur-vie*, or survives, a pun that Derrida uses in *Specters* as well [1994: xx])? Critics have been grappling with this challenge for a long time, with how to think through Derrida’s corpus and his *corps*, his body, in one breath. Works from Geoffrey Bennington’s *Not Half No End* to Peggy Kamuf’s *To Follow* to the film *Derrida* by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering juggle the interrelation between Derrida and his works in moves that are simultaneously homages and works of auto-deconstruction, an approach that makes a great deal of sense in this context.

Benoît Peeters’ masterful *Derrida: A Biography* strives to provide both an intellectual diagnosis and a documentation of a life at the same time, though in a deliberately conventional form. Rather than attempt to write ‘a Derridean biography’, Peeters decides instead to

write 'a biography of Derrida' (6). The distinction is key; Peeters notes that many of Derrida's chief interlocutors provide strong cautions against the possibility of a biography, and Derrida himself ('himself, I should perhaps claim) rewrites and undermines the notion of biography, let alone *bios*, the *graphie*, or the archive upon which the biographer must rely (in *Archive Fever* in particular) – all the while insisting upon the necessity of biography as such. Peeters' attempt to write this book is therefore a sincerely, deliberately quixotic one, one that escapes as it comes into being. Peeters describes himself as 'giddy at the extent and difficulty of the task' (6). It is a heartfelt, compelling text, providing the trace of a thinker who is so fascinated by the trace, by the trace's effacement and overwriting, and by that same trace's persistence. Peeters faces problems not dissimilar to those David Halperin encountered in *Saint Foucault*, that is, the problems of the 'embarrassment' entailed in writing about a thinker who so clearly calls into question the project of writing about a life (1995: 128). Peeters handles the disjuncture well, choosing an approach that in a very self-acknowledged way cannot be supported, yet that is, perhaps, the best and only route forward. The details of Derrida's life are there, they accumulate, they form a narrative, and even though Derrida's thought challenges the very writing of his life, Peeters' approach of communicating these details with his readers is not just functional, it is also sincere, careful, and unpretentious.

What emerges in *Derrida: A Biography* is not simply a deeply engrossing tale of a life lived. It is, and far more profoundly, a portrait of a man in the midst of navigating an impossible set of variables: a family and personal life riven with demands, stresses; an academic career beset with challenges, triumphs, and humiliations (at the hands of traditional educators and institutions) in France, while hailed internationally and resulting in evermore requests; and an intellectual project whose scope only grows over time, resulting in that sense of the inevitable belatedness of any attempt. All of these pressures are ones that Derrida persistently pursues, diligently attempting to satisfy requests on his time, answer his critics, and follow the demands of the deconstructive project and politics that he establishes, really, in his earliest writings.

This narrative adds up to one of a man somewhat reluctantly drawn into academic battles of position, from a Marxist politics that he can neither disavow nor endorse, to the exclusions of the discipline of philosophy, to institutional politics. Once drawn in, however, he appears tireless and forceful. Peeters ably narrates Derrida's early life

with his Jewish family in Algeria and his move to life as a student at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand and then l'École Normale Supérieure (ENS) in Paris, where he would eventually be employed alongside Althusser (after time in military service in Algeria followed by work in Le Mans and four years at the Sorbonne). Derrida's mixed experience at the ENS provides an early view of the disciplinary quandaries that he would face both in his employment there and in his later work as Director of Studies at l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. Derrida's work, seen as residing somewhere on the margins of philosophy in France and within terrain taken up by English and Comparative Literature departments in North America – where he would also spend a large amount of his time and energies (in particular at Johns Hopkins; Yale; the University of California, Irvine; and New York University) – proves to be not only intellectually but also institutionally troublesome. His life at the ENS not only establishes many of the key relationships in Derrida's life, it also sets up many of the tensions that follow. For instance, the devoted adherents of Althusserian Marxism and communist politics marginalize Derrida, and his experience with, for instance, the events of May '68 remains one of alienation even as he participates in it (196). Derrida's close friendship with Althusser, one of 'unfailing' loyalty (365), in spite of Althusser's periods of mental illness and his extremely troubling killing of his wife Héléne (an event that fills me with horror, even as Peeters delicately juggles it in his retelling), shows a mind perhaps more deeply engaged in critical thought and reason than with maintaining a dogmatic politics; he remains Althusser's friend long after many others have abandoned him.

Yet the mark of this immediate context diminishes in Peeters' telling as Derrida's early writing leads to international demands on his time that would not diminish. Early periods of depression and collapse are not overcome, exactly; rather, they become impossible. His work brings him into contact with other major French thinkers like Foucault and Lacan, and he would develop serious disagreements with both. His rift with Lacan, which appears to originate in the latter's using, in one of his seminars, a personal anecdote that Derrida shared with him (169) shows Derrida's strong, unwavering sense of the need for the personal, for the secret, and for the intimate; 'for Derrida', Peeters writes, 'the secret was a fundamental theme' (511). It is an important distinction for Peeters. As Derrida's work is taken up, critiqued and lauded, Derrida appears to be at times full of doubt and even despair, but rarely without the energy to continue (like the end of Beckett's *The Unnamable*: 'I can't go on, I'll go on' [2009: 407]). He comes into contact with thinkers with

whom he develops close sympathies, like Paul de Man and Hélène Cixous, and others with whom his relationship would shift over time from friendship to hostility, like Julia Kristeva.

Peeters' portrait of Derrida's private life is perhaps more discreet, yet it is held in balance with his public life; 'the borders between public and private life are one of the most delicate questions which a biographer encounters', Peeters avers (244). Extensive interviews with Derrida's family and friends yield an image of a man concerned for his family, frequently calling during another missed dinner to go over details and plans with his wife Marguerite or to discuss Pierre and Jean, his sons, although it remains clear that Marguerite handled all domestic matters (288). Peeters is particularly interested in tracing Derrida's increasing obsession with biography (and its necessity-impossibility) in this light, correlating elements of Derrida's philosophy with events in his life. Derrida's writing practice – in the cramped attic studio of their house in Ris-Orangis, on the outskirts of Paris – of collecting, hoarding materials shows a desire not only to retain and catalogue everything (right through the debates over the housing of his archives), but also a desire to maintain an impossible grasp on a life that disappears as it is lived, in a Proustian fashion. Peeters returns a couple of times to Derrida's statement that he only once destroyed a correspondence, and that he regretted doing so (5, 244). Although Peeters cannot ascertain which correspondence was destroyed, he wishes to be able to link this missing piece of the archive to Sylviane Agacinski, Derrida's longtime lover, and mother of his not-quite-acknowledged third son, Daniel, even though he realizes that the chronology is not right. Sylviane flits through this book as perhaps the key trace of the personal – her presence is more forceful than that of Marguerite – but Sylviane also escapes the author; she refused to participate in the book project (244), leaving Peeters working with scraps and reading between the lines. (Peeters discusses the process of composing the book in *Trois ans avec Derrida*.) Reading between the lines, indeed, becomes that much more revealing of Derrida's work after reading this biography.

I had an opportunity to see Derrida speak, at the University of York, England, in the spring of 2002. The conversation there was set up as informal, with Derrida seated on a chair and questioned by a selection of York's faculty. A terribly earnest graduate student at the time (an adjective of which I'm still guilty), with *Writing and Difference* and *Of Grammatology* under my belt, I remember my mixed feelings at the event: a sense of disappointment at the format

(I wanted a dead-serious lecture, by gum!) that shifted, over the span of the conversation, to ease, to surprise, and eventually to laughter. What struck me about the situation, in the end, was Derrida's humour. His many jokes and quips in the English that he manipulated with the complex ease that he of course manages in French countered not only the seriousness of the philosophical encounter, but also the incredible earnestness of my young self. My memory is that I shook his hand at the end of the event and thanked him; it was a profoundly good conversation to have witnessed. Looking back on that day through Peeters' biography, I can now recognize that the pancreatic cancer that would kill him – just as it likely did his father (219) – was just around the corner. His health was already in decline, yet he remained energetic, vigorous. Peeters recounts how Derrida continued to meet requests on his time, and continued to travel widely, even as the end came into view. My one act of witnessing, then, came relatively late; belatedness returns. Peggy Kamuf, quoted by Peeters, states that 'giving up' on his many obligations 'would have meant giving up on life itself' (525). Peeters' generous and sympathetic portrait of an intellectual life lived returns its readers with a grace and insight that can refocus our understandings of what it means to pursue intellectual projects as flawed human beings in an even more flawed terrain of engagements, debate, and politics. In that sense, Derrida's life, as well as his death, marks a beginning as well as an end, returns to us the necessity of commitment, of endeavour.

Death is very much that which nobody else can undergo or confront in my place. My irreplaceability is therefore conferred, delivered, 'given,' one can say, by death. (Derrida, 1995: 41)

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