



life.after.theory

edited by Michael Payne and John Schad

JACQUES DERRIDA • FRANK KERMODE • TORIL MOI • CHRISTOPHER NORRIS

life. after. theory

This page intentionally left blank

life. after. theory

edited by
Michael Payne
and
John Schad

Continuum

The Tower Building
11 York Road
London SE1 7NX

370 Lexington Avenue
New York
NY 10017-65503

Editorial matter © editors

Interviews © editors and contributors

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

First published 2003

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 0-8264-6565-X

Typeset by YHT Ltd, London

Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall

contents

acknowledgements	vi
preface: what are we after?	ix
1 following theory: Jacques Derrida	1
2 value after theory: Frank Kermode	52
3 truth after theory: Christopher Norris	78
4 music, religion and art after theory: Frank Kermode and Christopher Norris	115
5 feminist theory after theory: Toril Moi	133
epilogue: coming back to 'life': John Schad	168
notes	190
index	195

acknowledgements

We would like to thank all those who helped with the two 'life.after.theory' conferences at Loughborough University – very many colleagues and postgraduates in the Department of English and Drama helped in very many ways. We should, though, make particular mention of Pauline Higgs for her administration, Clare Hanson, Marion Shaw and Kevin Mills for their lifts, Dave Hill for his recording, Simon King, James Holden and Jessica Butt for their transcribing, and – above all – Jonathan Taylor for all his hard work. Finally, we would also like to thank Tristan Palmer for his unwavering commitment to the project.

Michael Payne
John Schad

All royalties from this book will go to Oxfam.

LIFE.LINES

... a *criticism of life*. The end and aim of all literature, if one considers it attentively, is, in truth, nothing but that.

Matthew Arnold, 'Joubert'

If death is not opposable it is, already, *life death*.

Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card*

CLOV: Do you believe in the life to come?

HAMM: Mine was always that.

Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*

A good book is the precious life-blood of a master-spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life.

John Milton, *Aeropagitica*

It's life and life only.

Bob Dylan, 'It's Alright Ma'

... that hateful mystification known as 'life'.

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*

... there is life and life.

Henry James, Preface to *The Tragic Muse*

This page intentionally left blank

preface

what are we after?

John Schad

Philosophy always comes on the scene too late....As the *thought* of the world, it appears only when actuality is already there, cut and dried.... It is only with the fall of dusk that the owl of Minerva spreads its wings.

Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*

For those of us within the small world of academic literary studies it seems that philosophy has come not too late but too early – literary theory, ‘the *thought* of’ our world, seems to have come and gone, the moment of ‘high’ theory appears to have passed. ‘Theory’, of course, is a notoriously loose term, covering as it does a whole multitude of critical and intellectual sins most of which have been committed in the name of ‘poststructuralism’ which is itself a loose term including, among other things, such diverse developments as Lacanian psychoanalysis, Kristevan feminism, Althusserian Marxism, Derridean deconstruction and Foucauldian history. In one such form or another poststructuralism got almost everywhere; if it can be said (speaking very roughly) to have begun in Paris in the late 1960s, and peaked in Yale in the 1970s and 1980s, then it has been busy declining in a university ‘near you’ in the second half of the

nineties. Indeed, in the last few years there have been a number of books marking this passing – witness, for example, Thomas Docherty's *After Theory* (1996), Wendell Harris's *Beyond Poststructuralism* (1996) and Martin McQuillan's *Post-Theory* (1999). Some, in such books, have argued that theory has been discredited; some that it has simply grown old and outdated; some that it has completed its task, that theory has now vanished into new, and better critical practice; others that it is impossible to talk of the end of a body of thought that itself does so much to problematize notions of historical linearity. In addition, there are those who point out that the word 'after' can mean not only 'following in time' but also 'in pursuit of' or even 'in imitation of'. *Could* life be in pursuit of theory? *Could* life ever imitate theory? And, indeed, what is 'life'? Whatever the answer to that, whatever story we tell of the last thirty years, and whatever way(s) you read 'after', there *is* a widespread understanding, explicit or implicit, that literary studies is now experiencing something we might just call 'life after theory'.

What follows is an attempt to respond to both this phrase and the 'event' it seems to describe. To do this we have brought together four of the scholars who have been most influential both in and 'after' theory: namely, Jacques Derrida, Frank Kermode, Christopher Norris and Toril Moi. Each contributes an interview held at some point between November 2001 and July 2002, either at Loughborough University in the UK or Duke University in the USA. In the case of Kermode, Norris and Moi – all of whom were interviewed by Michael Payne – it was

PREFACE

a case of life (or theory) repeating itself since Mike first interviewed them at Bucknell University in the USA as part of a series of events that were subsequently published as the *Bucknell Theory Lectures* (Blackwell, 1990–4).

Exactly what is happening in these interviews is something that I attempt to explore in the Epilogue, but in the meantime we leave it to readers to decide for themselves – to decide, for instance, whether the owl of Minerva, the bird of theory, is finally shot; whether it is now worn like a dead albatross; or whether it makes one last, belated and glorious flight. Whatever, it is our hope that the book will both reflect upon life after theory and actively explore and enact what that might yet be or mean for critic, text and, indeed, world – or, if you will, ‘Life’. (Did someone say ‘Leavis’?)

This page intentionally left blank

following theory

Jacques Derrida

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE by James Holden —————

For more than thirty-five years, Jacques Derrida has been pre-eminent in the Humanities. Always a controversial figure, his expansive and notoriously complex *œuvre* has been both celebrated and denounced; for many he has become one of the major figures in Western philosophy, for some he is an 'embarrassment' whose writing 'defies comprehension'.

Born in Algeria in 1930 to a Sephardic Jewish family, Derrida did not move to France until 1949 where he progressed, sometimes haltingly, towards a career in academic philosophy. In 1964, after four years at the Sorbonne, Derrida moved to the *École Normale Supérieure*, where he remained for twenty years. It was, though, as early as 1966 that Derrida arrived on the international scene with his seminal lecture 'Structure, Sign and Play' which was given at a now-famous colloquium at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore; a year later Derrida published *Of Grammatology*, a 'book' which opens by announcing 'The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing'. Since 1984 Derrida has worked at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, while also being a Visiting Professor at both Yale and California, Irvine. In 1992 Derrida

was, after much controversy, awarded an honorary doctorate by Cambridge University. This controversy took the form of a very public debate regarding his right to such an award, with nineteen Cambridge dons writing to *The Times* to denounce Derrida's work. The issue was finally put to a vote, the first of its kind in almost thirty years; the pro-Derrida lobby triumphed by 336 votes to 204.

This vote did not, though, signal a simple assimilation of Derrida's work, which continues to have a complex relationship to the academy and, in particular, that key institution of the academy, the institution of philosophy. As Derrida remarks, 'the task of deconstruction' is 'to discover the non-place ... which would be the "other" of philosophy'. Derrida's exploration of this 'non-place' has involved him in extraordinarily close-reading of not only the great canon of philosophy – thinkers such as Plato, Kant, Hegel and Husserl – but also a great deal of writing usually thought of as literary: witness his engagement with writers such as Kafka, Joyce, Celan and Blanchot. The astonishing range of Derrida's reading is, perhaps, matched only by the range of his concerns; as Derrida once remarked, 'deconstructive work addresses [not only] ... the theme of crisis or critique, but also – [and] the list is unending – that of science, truth, literature, politics, sexual difference, the democracy to come, [and] the Enlightenment of today and tomorrow.' To read Derrida is, then, to be, like Derrida himself, 'constantly surprised ... [and] having a feeling of being always on the verge.' At the same time one also has a sense of quite remarkable consistency, of a sustained, rigorous and even ethical commitment to the other. To quote Derrida, 'deconstruction is ... a positive response to an alterity which necessarily calls, summons, or

motivates it. Deconstruction is therefore vocation – a response to a call.'

EDITORIAL NOTE

On the afternoon of 10 November 2001, Jacques Derrida participated in a round-table discussion which constituted the first of the two 'life.after.theory' events held in the Department of English and Drama at Loughborough University. Professor Derrida responded to questions put to him by Professor Nicholas Royle, Professor Christopher Norris and Dr Sarah Wood, all of whom have published extensively on deconstruction. Derrida also responded to some questions from the audience. In all, Derrida spoke for almost two hours, without any notes and in English. He modestly asked the audience to forgive him for his English, and would like that request to be echoed here. It should also be remembered that this text is not, of course, something Derrida has written, but rather a transcript of an astonishing oral performance.

This performance followed a lecture by Derrida in the morning. The lecture was entitled 'Perjuries' and itself arose out of a strange, almost uncanny moment in Derrida's own life – as Derrida himself explained in the lecture:

Toward the end of the 1970s, at Yale, [my friend] Paul de Man said to me one day something like this:

If you want to know a part of my life, read 'Hölderlin en Amérique.' Henri Thomas, whom I knew here, in America after the war, published this text in *Mercure de France*, and it was reprinted [in 1964] ... as a novel [called] ... *Le parjure*.

I confess that I did not rush out looking for the book ... Years

later, at a bookseller's in Nice, where I was on vacation, I came upon *Le parjure*. I read it very quickly, but very quickly understood that the principal character ... Stéphane Chalier, resembled in certain features the real person of Paul de Man; [the novel told] the story of a second marriage, in the United States, while a first marriage in Europe had not ended in legal divorce. Hence the accusation of bigamy and perjury After my reading I remember that I wrote to Paul de Man, a few words, as discreetly as possible, in conformity with the customary tone of our exchanges, saying that I had been *bouleversé*, bowled over. We never spoke about it again; just as I never spoke about it with Henri Thomas whom I didn't know at the time and whom I nevertheless telephoned, years later, in 1987 ... to hear his response to what ... had just [been] discovered about the past ... of Paul de Man.

What had just been discovered was that between 1940 and 1942, during the Nazi occupation of Belgium, Paul de Man had written a series of articles for two collaborationist newspapers. After the war de Man, of course, had moved to America and become a leading figure in what was known as 'the Yale school of deconstruction'. The parallels between Paul de Man and Stéphane Chalier, the *fictional* Belgian in America with the secret past, are obvious and provide one crucial point of reference throughout the round-table discussion. Equally important is Stéphane's haunting response to the accusation of perjury: 'Just imagine, I was not thinking about it.'¹ It is with precisely these words that Derrida began his lecture, and for Derrida they raised a number of questions – most obviously, the question of *not* thinking and what that might mean for the Cartesian notion of a continuous thinking self; this led Derrida to the more general questions of continuity and discontinuity, sequence and consequence – or, more specifically, what does or does not *follow*. This, in turn,

shaded into discussion of *who* does or does not follow, a discussion that focused on two particular figures: the person of the acolyte (literally, 'a follower,' from the Greek word *akolouthos*) and the rhetorical device known as anacoluthon, which the dictionary defines as 'a sentence or construction lacking grammatical sequence'. It is with these two figures that Nick Royle begins the round table.

Nicholas Royle: The first question that I would like to ask is, I suppose, a question in three parts and it's about the acolyte and anacoluthon. The acolyte is the follower and thus is the apparent opposite of anacoluthon. Anacoluthon is what fails to follow; it's what's non-sequential or literally 'without following' (*an*, privative, *akolouthos*, 'following'). So I thought with this question about the acolyte and anacoluthon I could take anacoluthon first, seeing as it's second, and ask whether we could read 'life.after.theory' as an anacoluthon. I think I'll just leave that as the first part of the question.

The second is this: Jacques, I wonder if you would be kind enough to say something about the figure of the acolyte? In particular, I was thinking of the sense that, following your work, the notion of the follower or acolyte becomes difficult, indeed perhaps impossible. 'Who follows another follows nothing' is a quotation from Montaigne, which we might relate to something that you say in *Monolingualism of the Other*: 'Contrary to what one is often most tempted to believe, the master is nothing.' So, I wonder if you might say a little bit more about the notion of the acolyte, given that it

seems to me in many ways inappropriate, perhaps impossible, to think of you as the acolyte of, let's say, Foucault or Freud or Heidegger. I wonder if this is partly because, without wishing to understate the importance of notions of fidelity that I think pervade everything that you write, it is difficult not to feel that your signature or the singularity of your work has to do with the figure of the anacoluthon about which you were speaking earlier.

The third part of this question has to do with the idea that one cannot follow the figure of the anacoluthon in your work *without* following, *without* grammar, *without* a fidelity to grammar. This third part of the question has to do, in particular, with the figure of the woman. I'm struck by the way in which woman seems to figure as a kind of anacoluthon in a number of your texts. I'm thinking, for example, of the end of *Otobiographies* where you say, apropos of Nietzsche's lectures on the future of our educational institutions, 'Woman never appears at any point along the umbilical cord, either to study or to teach, no woman or trace of woman'; or, at the end of 'Step of Hospitality/No Hospitality' [*Pas d'hospitalité*], where you are speaking of, precisely, the end of the story (in Judges 19) and you remark: 'In the name of hospitality, all the men are *sent* a woman, to be precise, a concubine'; or, at the end of this morning's lecture, where you spoke of what you call a kind of idiocy of man, finally focusing on the figure of 'an impassive and, at bottom, inaccessible woman'. In each case, woman comes, in a sense, to surprise or anacoluthize (if I can say that) everything you've been saying.

At issue here is perhaps a broader 'question of style', as you pose it in *Éperons*. I wonder if you can say a little bit more about this grammaticality or a-grammaticality of the woman and about the way in which she seems to turn up at the end of these texts. Linked to this, I wonder if you could perhaps elaborate a little more on the relation or non-relation between the woman and the acolyte.

Jacques Derrida: Thank you, Nick, you've said a lot of things already. It is not a question, it's already a set of original propositions. Now, to formalize everything I will try to say, I would say – in the most formalized form – of the logic which was at work in my lecture, in fact in your questions too, that there is no simple opposition between the acolyte, or the 'acoluthon' and the 'anacoluthon'. That is a problem, because to accompany, or to follow in the most demanding and authentic way, implies the 'anacol,' the 'not-following,' the break in the following, in the company so to speak. So, if we agree on this, a number of consequences will follow: you cannot simply oppose the acolyte and the anacoluthon – logically they are opposed; but in fact, what appears as a necessity is that, in order to follow in a consistent way, to be true to what you follow, you have to interrupt the following. So, let me leave this statement in its abstract form and then I would like to go back to the series of questions that you ask.

'Life.after.theory'; I'm not sure, from the very beginning, that I understood what this title meant, the 'after'. To 'be after' may mean that you try and be consistent

with what you left, you try to live after theory in a way which is consistent with theory, what you have said in theory; *or*, if you survive theory, you do something else. So, this is the opposition. 'After' means 'according to' theory *or* simply *after* theory, breaking with theory as if life was something irreducible to theory. Now, I never use the word 'theory' in the way that you do here; I don't use the word 'theory' after you, after the Americans and the English speakers. So, I would translate this into French as 'life after philosophy', after deconstruction, after literature and so on and so forth. So, in that case, I try, I would say, in principle, to live my life *after* all these things by trying to be consistent with what I say, or what I write, or what I teach as a philosopher, as a deconstructive philosopher without making my life a simple application or consequence of what I say. My life is irreducible to what I say and it is certainly the case in, for instance, *The Post Card*, that I confess that everything I oppose, so to speak, in my texts, everything that I deconstruct – presence, voice, living, voice and so on – is exactly what I'm after in life. I love the voice, I love presence, I love . . . ; there is no love, no desire without it. So, I'm constantly denying, so to speak, in my life what I'm saying in my books or my teaching. Which doesn't mean that I don't believe what I write, but I try to understand why there is what I call Necessity, and I write this with a capital 'N' – Necessity, as if it were someone, perhaps a woman, a Necessity which compels me to say that there is no immediate presence, compels me to deconstruct and say that there *is* an interruption, there *is* a possibility for a letter not to arrive at its destination