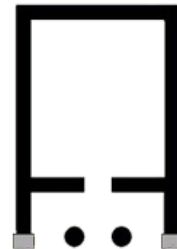


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‘Long live theory’: An Interview with Derek Attridge

Aaron Aquilina, Irene Scicluna

ANTAE: You seem to like using opening sentences in the form of short questions. For example, in your introduction to Jacques Derrida’s *Acts of Literature*, you start by asking ‘what is literature?’¹ Why would you say you do this? Would it have anything to do with the fact that the questions you start with can never be answered?

DEREK ATTRIDGE: That’s a good question because I’ve never thought about the way I begin. But I suppose you’re right; I do tend to work by coming across an issue that poses a question which I then try to work through on paper or on a computer. But I don’t say to myself, “here is the structure of an argument and I’m going to flesh it out”. I don’t plan an essay or a book in any detail before I begin. I suppose those inquiries are ways of getting myself going, of getting myself thinking. Of course, through the processes of revisions, that first draft is very much altered. Yes, they are often questions that cannot be answered, but I suppose those are the most interesting ones, aren’t they?

A: What about the final line of the introduction of you and Jane Elliott’s *Theory After ‘Theory’*: “‘Theory’ is dead; long live theory?”² What do you think of that line now (given that your book was published two years ago)? Is theory dead, alive, or in some space in between?

DA: I don’t think things have changed much. I wrote that last line and Jane [Elliott] was very pleased when I suggested it as a concluding statement. Theory seems to me to be everywhere and nowhere, in a sense. The theory that thrived in the seventies and eighties has become part of the atmosphere indeed, most people who ask questions of literature or aesthetics today

¹ Derek Attridge, ‘Introduction: Derrida and the Questioning of Literature’, in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London/New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 1-32 (p. 1).

² Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge, ‘Introduction: theory’s nine lives’, in *Theory after ‘Theory’*, ed. Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 1-15 (p. 14).

have, in some way, interacted with the heyday of theory, as it were. I think it's fair to say that the days of 'grand theory' — the days of Derrida, Foucault, Barthes, Kristeva and so on — are now over. But it is also true that their thinking permeates in a way that interestingly provokes critics today to think and write. Of course, there are always new areas of interest. Who would have thought twenty years ago that the question between the human and the animal (the human-animal) would become a major theoretical issue? Or that disability should be so much on the radar? I think there will always be new areas that have been a long time coming. They have remained somewhat in the shadows and now they've suddenly emerged to benefit from this theoretical apparatus that has always existed to tackle them. So, let's say Derrida never addressed the question of disability. People who have read Derrida can use what they've read in talking about issues regarding the way they understand disability.

A: On the subject of these theoretical repercussions, so to speak, when one reads *L'Animal Que Donc Je Suis*, one goes back to Kant's 'Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History' and in turn, they both go back to the Genesis. Do you think that *going back* is a wrong move, particularly with texts that are new? Does going back betray a sense of conservative assuredness, or should we strive to keep our re-reading fresh? Do these connections with the past truly ground new texts in the conventional philosophical theoretical tradition?

DA: I think we do have to go back; otherwise we end up reinventing the wheel and start going round in circles that have been traced many times before. No, I think you're absolutely right, we can't engage with serious philosophical, theoretical and critical questions without some sense of how our traditions emerge out of Greek philosophy, out of Kant, out of Hegel, out of Nietzsche. I don't think it's a conservative gesture at all, or if it is a conservative gesture, it's a very fruitful and important one. Certainly, if you look at the most influential figures in terms of theory, you see that they are always going back. Deleuze is going back to Spinoza. Derrida is going back to Kant. Of course, that makes it a challenge because these are not easy philosophers and writers to read, but I think true advances can only be made in this way - you have to go back in order to make the leap forward.

A: In your exchange with Martin Hägglund during the colloquium ‘Ethics, Hospitality, and Radical Atheism’, you asked Hägglund an interesting question about whether he attempts to categorise Derrida, whether he attempts to categorise or ‘winnow’ Derrida.³ Is there, however, something to be gained from categorising Derrida, be it thematically, historically or stylistically?

DA: With a thinker as wide-ranging as Derrida, I suppose that it’s inevitable that anybody who engages with that body of work is going to find his or her own particular way through it. You’d have to be Derrida again to embrace the whole of his output. Martin Hägglund has a certain mind, and a certain aspect of Derrida’s work appeals to him. I think that it’s an absolutely central feature that he’s seized on; indeed, I think that his work is the most important commentary to be written on Derrida since Derrida himself died, particularly because at the heart of Hägglund’s thinking on all of Derrida’s fields of interest is a very basic understanding of the relation between space and time. I think that’s great, but there is always the danger, of course, that if you *do* winnow that very complex mass of material and follow a single line, you’re going to leave certain dimensions out of account.

It seems to me that Martin’s work doesn’t pay sufficient attention to the poetic side of Derrida. Hägglund is very interested in the central logic of Derrida, but Derrida was much more than a logician. In fact, as I have discussed with Martin [Hägglund], when Derrida writes about hospitality, for instance, the language he uses betrays the struggle that we engage in when having to offer hospitality to whatever (or whoever) the stranger is that arrives on the threshold. It seems to me that he [Derrida] never fully elucidates the notion of absolute hospitality and the way in which that absolute hospitality relates to the practical issues of day-to-day living.

When faced with these issues, Derrida doesn’t have an easy answer. In my review of Martin [Hägglund]’s book, I quoted some of the passages in which Derrida tries to articulate the

³ See ‘Ethics, Hospitality and Radical Atheism: A Dialogue’, in *University of Oxford* <<http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/ethics-hospitality-and-radical-atheism-dialogue-video>> [accessed 16th November 2013]

relationship between absolute hospitality and pragmatic hospitality. The richness of Derrida's writing, in my own experience, lies partly in his struggles, in the difficulty of articulating what he's trying to say. He's always at the edge of thinkable. Derrida, like all great philosophers, takes thought to its limit and it is at that point that language begins to break down and the poetic emerges. We do have to use language in the way that great poets have used it, and that's partly why Derrida is very interested in literature. So, I'd say that it's right to have people who take a very narrow approach to Derrida, but it's also right that work such as Derrida's is seen as not purely logical, not purely instrumental.

A: In *Demeure*, Derrida references the fact that when he says 'I am speaking French' in French, this speech act assumes an indeterminate someone with whom the speaker could form a *we*.⁴ Do you think that this indeterminacy leads to a loss amongst readers who read Derrida in translation? Or does he, on the other hand, wish us to think of him as linguistically adaptable, as evidenced by, for instance, his various Anglo-Francophone wordplay in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*?

DA: This, of course, is always a problem in any complex writing. Translation is always going to be a difficult issue. There are some successful translations of Derrida into English and there are poor translations. When I collected some of Derrida's writings on literature in *Acts of Literature*, my first idea was that I would simply put together translations as many of them had already been translated. It was only when I started to go through the English carefully that I found some of it didn't seem quite right. I would check the French and realise that certain parts were mistranslations, so then I would have to work on those translations myself and try to improve them. Derrida himself was always very sensitive to the need for translation and certainly didn't insist on being read in French. Translation wasn't such an important issue for him and he would have been horrified at the thought that one could only read his work in French.

⁴Maurice Blanchot, *The Instant of My Death* and Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000), p. 34.

He plays with words even in other languages. He wrote a little piece on poetry in Italian called ‘Che cos'è la poesia?’, in which he capitalises on the sound of the Italian word ‘for ‘hedgehog’, ‘istrice’. The English and French versions of the essay only appeared later.⁵ I’m reminded of *Monolingualism of the Other*, where he says ‘I only have one language; it is not mine’.⁶ You’re never at home in a language. You’re never *not* translating even if you’re operating in your own language. You’re translating between different registers, different cultural conditions, etcetera. There’s a whole spectrum of translation.

A: This conceptual richness of language is also relevant in the works of James Joyce. Would you say that, in a sense, he was imprisoned by language? Do you think that Joyce manages to liberate himself from its confines?

DA: Well, Joyce, like Derrida, had a very complex relationship to the English language which comes out in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. We feel, just as Derrida felt about French, that the language Joyce is speaking is not quite his own. Both Derrida and Joyce only have one language but they feel somewhat disassociated from it. Yet Joyce discovered resources within English that no other writer had discovered. And then, of course, he began to fuse English with as many as forty or fifty other languages in *Finnegan’s Wake*.

A: Derrida has the tendency to respond to the theorists or the writers he is writing about while in some ways inhabiting their language. What about the role of the one writing about Derrida, as you did? There’s an issue of style there. How does one go after Derrida? Does one attempt to speak his language?

DA: When Derrida writes about a philosopher and spends quite a lot of time, as you say, inhabiting that philosopher’s thoughts, as well as his actual way of writing, it sometimes gives rise to misinterpretations. People sometimes think that Derrida is speaking and they don’t

⁵ Jacques Derrida, ‘Che cos'è la poesia?’ in *Between the Blinds: A Derrida Reader*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 221-241.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other, Or, The Prosthesis of the Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 25.

realise that what he is doing is actually articulating the thoughts of other writers. You never feel that it is mimicry, that he's doing it to try and claim that he's the equal of Nietzsche or Heidegger or whoever it might be; it is a way of reproducing the language that he is in the process of analysing. But when he is not doing this, he writes in a very distinctive way.

I do tend to feel that critical commentators are often unable to escape from the language of the writer they are talking about, and this is certainly true of many commentators on Derrida's writing. Consciously or unconsciously, they are doing it as a kind of homage but also a kind of validation: "Look, I'm as good as this writer".

My own preference has always been to try to find my own voice in which to talk about Derrida or whoever it is I'm writing about. I do get a bit impatient sometimes with commentators who I feel have not been able to escape from that tempting, gravitational pull of the Derridean style. To me, it's like a lever. You need to be somewhere where you can pull on one end of the lever and get a real grip on what's going on instead of falling into something that too easily becomes imitation.

A: Throughout Derrida's later works, we find that he gives more and more interviews, and perhaps there is an art in this. When one reads Derrida's texts, it feels as though the ideas in Derrida's written texts are often too complex and dense for any easy transition into the form of the verbal interview to take place. You were yourself involved in one of the most important interviews with Derrida, and many times, people come to Derrida through an interview in, for instance, *Acts of Literature*. How different is Derrida in terms of the textual and verbal spheres? How would you explain this phase in his late work, where the interview becomes, perhaps, one of his major means of thinking?

DA: I agree entirely and I think it's surprising. I remember when I first heard Derrida answering questions after a lecture. I recall thinking then that he is remarkably good in that mode. He would give a long and complex lecture which would be quite tricky to follow and then someone would ask him a question — sometimes not even a very good question — and he would go off in a beautifully clear, slow and thoughtful style. But as you suggest, he would

deal with that question and the complex issues in a different mode. I'm sure he would have said — if we had asked him that question — that my real work is in the text, and the interview is inadequate, simply a superficial supplement. Perhaps that's the best way to think about this question. But maybe the interviews are supplements in the sense that they don't just come after the texts, but they also seem very often to bring out more clearly something at the heart of what he's dressed up in his rather complex language. Even in his early interviews, *Positions* for example, he would conversationally work his way through a very particular question or topic and try various angles. When he does this it can be wonderfully illuminating.

Why he became more accepting of the interview later, I don't know. He certainly relied more and more on the spontaneous in his later life. Even his written work came across as very spontaneous, and in my opinion, often rather too lengthy. His lectures got longer and longer. But in the interview situations, where it was give and take, he was brilliant. I too, if I want to teach Derrida or try to show somebody his importance, will often turn to one of his interviews rather than to the written texts.

A: Finally, perhaps a closing word on your most recent book, *Moving Words: Forms of English Poetry*?

DA: As the title suggests, *Moving Words* focuses on poetry, in particular, poetic rhythms. It has two sections and the first deals with questions of rhyme and form in English and French. The chapters are on specific topics but they raise general issues on the questions of rhyme, phrasing and repetition in poetry. Some of them have been published before in different forms. The second section is largely about rhythm and metre, on the major forms of English poetry: pentameter, four-beat verse, and so on. There's an essay in there on Keats specifically as an example of someone who handled iambic pentameter very skilfully. It's an attempt to keep alive, if you like, the discussion on poetry as that which really puts language through its paces. We mustn't forget that, as Nowotny writes in her wonderful book on poetry, 'poetry is language at full stretch'.⁷

⁷ Winifred Nowotny, *The Language Poets Use* (London: The Athlone Press, 1996), p. 85.

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