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Martin McQuillan, *Deconstruction Without Derrida*. London and New York: Continuum Books, 2012. 214 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$120.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-4411-0794-7.

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“Few beyond ‘the Family’ are reading Derrida,” Martin McQuillan writes in *Deconstruction Without Derrida*, “and if deconstruction has no readers, it has no future” (p. 4). This has been a perennial concern since the death of Jacques Derrida in October 2004: how to carry on, how to honor Derrida’s thought and writing, how to give it a future. McQuillan’s volume opens with this question and is one of a number of publications since the death of Derrida that mourn his passing, reflect on his contributions to philosophy and contemporary thought, dispute his legacy, and attempt to take stock.[1]

The author insists in his introduction to *Deconstruction Without Derrida* that it is time for deconstruction to move beyond memorializing gestures and acts of mourning, questions of legacy and the publication of additional seminars of Derrida. It is time for deconstruction to “look outside itself” (p. 6), to “challenge the issues and thinkers of the present intellectual scene” (p. 6) in a dialogue carried out in “in an open and unprogrammed way” (p. 7). This is a very welcome prospect. But it is not a simple thing to achieve. In the first place, it is not clear exactly what “deconstruction” is, a question complicated by the author’s loyalty to both Derrida and de Man, in equal measure. Today, it seems, we find less discussion of the work of de Man and some dispute about whether a distinction can, or should, be made between the early work of Derrida and the later work, which appears to take up ethical and political questions more explicitly than before. Moreover, distinct interpretations of Derrida’s work are emerging, as evidenced by the recently published *Radical Atheism, Derrida and the Time of Life*, by Martin Hägglund, which challenges the more theological readings of Derrida by John Caputo and, to a lesser degree, Hent DeVries.[2]

This anti-theological reinterpretation of Derrida has prompted talk of a “materialist” Derrida on the one hand and an “idealist” Derrida on the other. When philosophers from Henri Bergson to Derrida have worked hard to undo this most metaphysical of oppositions, it is perhaps shocking to find that it comes back into play in this context. The stakes in this debate, however, are political and reflect changes in the state of the world. A liberal politics and a discourse of democracy-to-come was one thing at the end of the cold war; even, we might say, up to the events of 9/11. However, the tightening grip of global capitalism, an ever-growing income disparity, and the precarious state of the biosphere in our Anthropocene Age have led some to grow impatient with discourses of liberal politics, whether they be couched in a language of deconstruction or not. This perspective, as we shall see, is the polemical target of this volume of essays, which in the end, challenges the egalitarian ontology of Jacques Rancière, the “new Maoism” of Slavoj Žižek, and, by implication, thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben and Alain Badiou.

The way forward to the “opening out” espoused by the author and to the core of his polemical engagement is slow-going, as fully the first half of this volume (five essays out of ten) concerns Derrida’s exchanges with members of what McQuillan has called “‘the Family’” (p. 4). The “fraternal” (p. 26) relations between Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy—“‘canonised’, institutional saint of deconstruction” (p. 31)—occupy our attention in chapters one through three, where we learn that Derrida rebukes Nancy

in *Toucher 1* for his “lapse from deconstruction into metaphysics” (p. 15) and reminds him that “there is deconstruction and there is deconstruction” (cited by McQuillan, p. 18). Along the way, McQuillan raises a number of interesting questions, such as Derrida’s attention to “the relation between ‘thought, weight...language and digital touch’” (p. 27). He suggests that this question of digital media is “suggestive of what the reader of tomorrow might salvage from this extended account of the fraternal relation between Nancy and Derrida” (p. 26). However, he quickly drops this question, reminding us that “the entire point of Derrida’s book” is “that touch is from the beginning a virtual experience” (p. 27), indeed that “there is nothing more virtual than reading and writing” (p. 37). The eyes begin to glaze over.

In chapters four and five, it is a question of the “iterative relation” (p. 83) between Derrida and de Man, a relationship that, for McQuillan (not everyone would agree) “defines what deconstruction itself, as a word and a concept, has come to mean” (p. 74).

Here a potentially interesting discussion of de Man’s readings of Hölderlin and of Heidegger gets “cut short...before it is even able to get going” (p. 79) in favor of turning back to an anecdotal discussion of Henri Thomas’s fictionalization of de Man’s personal history in the novel *Le Parjure*.<sup>[3]</sup> It makes a good story, in a journalistic sort of way. But what is the point? We learn that Derrida eventually tries to take his distance from de Man; the author presents this as a matter of “the purity of deconstructive method” (p. 99), but I think a lot more could be said about Derrida’s gesture.

Chapter six is concerned with textual relations between Derrida and another Yale associate, Harold Bloom (it is a question of the “metaphorical status of ‘Jewishness’ which connects their writing” [p. 105]), after which McQuillan turns to issues of feminism and “Queer Theory”. A rather thin and somewhat ingratiating chapter on Hélène Cixous disparages Spivak for misreading Cixous without displaying much curiosity about what was at stake for her— her postcolonial feminist perspective—or discussing her various engagements with deconstruction and her efforts, precisely, to open out deconstruction to concerns of the present day. Given that Cixous and Derrida were longstanding friends, interlocutors, even co-authors, we have still not left the Family. In the next chapter the author enters into a rather heated “family disagreement” with Judith Butler, who he upbraids (with bracing rudeness, at times, in spite of professions of friendship and respect) for “repressing” Derrida in her *Antigone’s Claim* (p. 148).

One of the underlying claims of *Deconstruction without Derrida* is that Derrida provided the foundation for most of the developments of cultural studies and for many of the most pressing issues under discussion today. There is some truth in this (though Gilles Deleuze did have something to say about animals, and Foucault, in his way, did concern himself with issues of sovereignty) and this is a credit to Derrida’s intense intellectual engagements on so many levels. But to take this as an excuse to level general charges of amnesia (or, worse, theft) against contemporary theorists who do not explicitly identify with the legacy of deconstruction strikes me as counterproductive. Butler, for example, is found guilty of not giving credit to Derrida for having anticipated (in some obscure pages of *Glas*) a crucial point of her argument in *Antigone’s Claim*; McQuillan paints it as being derivative even as, at the same time, he suggests that Butler gets things wrong in the end because she is not deconstructive enough: “the trouble with Butler’s “Queer Theory” in this book,” he writes, “is not that it is deconstructive, but that it is not deconstructive enough, but keep that to yourselves, I would not want any scandal attaching to the family” (p. 150).

The jokey tone is a symptom, I think, of a real problem. McQuillan acknowledges that Butler moves beyond Derridean deconstruction, recognizing her “attempt to push her thoughts beyond the representational matrix of philosophical discourse to meet the emerging materialities of our present conditions” (p. 139). He even goes so far as to affirm that “this sort of ‘practical deconstruction’...is precisely the direction that responsible philosophy should be taking after Derrida” (p. 139). Yet this essay is fraught and finally uninteresting, because instead of the author looking in “an open and

unprogrammed way” (p. 7) at the complications—the gains and losses—intrinsic to any attempt at practical, or applied, deconstruction, he adopts a virulent polemical tone that he then tries to render ironic through the trope of the family quarrel (and we all know how vicious those can get). In *Deconstruction After 9/11*, which attests to McQuillan’s own interest in applied deconstruction, he writes: “Derrida Studies should pay more attention to the possible positivism of the political event...theory should attend to the positive and the empirical as such.”[4] Yet he is unsympathetic when it comes to Butler and Spivak. Perhaps due to a strong de Manian influence, he has trouble attending to the positive and the empirical. His own brand of activism is distinctly textual and involves not a (Sartrean) writerly engagement, but a (de Manian) readerly patience, the patience required for “meticulous readings of the most scrupulous of philosophers.”[5] The broader point here has precisely to do with whether it is possible for deconstruction to open out and just what this might mean.

Although the author seems concerned with a possible eclipse of deconstruction by American Cultural Studies, I don’t think this is the most pressing issue today and I don’t believe McQuillan does either. The real target is what McQuillan calls the “new Maoism” (p. 173) of Žižek, the subject of his last chapter. On his way to Žižek, however, the author makes a polemical case against Rancière. He accuses Rancière of trading “with impunity” (p. 155) in archaic concepts (art, history, and the aesthetic) and of merely doing philosophy (he “is someone who is reluctant to read” [p. 152]), even though McQuillan acknowledges that Rancière both gives a “historical determination of the esthetic” (p. 157) and proposes a “figural and ruptured nature of the esthetic” (p. 167). He criticizes Rancière’s thought for bringing with it a “metaphysical virus” (p. 163) and, at the same time, for being too postmodern, in that it evokes a concept of community that could not hold up, as it is “nothing but the gaps produced by dissensus and separation” (p. 168). He schools Rancière via de Man on the question of history, but in the end Rancière is rejected for his notion of “emancipation as esthetic effect,” which “at once relegates art to a popularization and metaphorization of philosophy and hands the esthetic to the masses” (p. 168).

One has the sense that the author is flailing about. Perhaps sensing that his polemical zeal has not quite hit the mark he concedes in a gentlemanly manner at the end of his essay that he may have overstated his case against Rancière “in order to better hit the target of the current theoretical scene in which the texts of Rancière circulate” (p. 170) and acknowledges that “without doubt Rancière is one of the more sophisticated and democratic-minded thinkers on that scene” (p. 170). The case against Rancière, in the end, includes a large dose of guilt by association. The real concern, it becomes clear in the final chapter on Žižek, is philosophical endorsement of political violence. In the end this strikes me as being a separate argument—Camus made it against Sartre, for example—one that can be, and should be, made independently of questions concerning the stakes, the virtues and the limits of deconstruction.

Martin McQuillan, a powerfully accomplished reader of both Derrida and de Man—indeed a patient reader of scrupulous philosophers, to adapt his own expression—is not at his best in this volume which (marred by extremely poor copy-editing) strikes me as ill-conceived. It is not at all clear who the intended reader of this volume might be. The book is polemical, in spite of the occasionally light-hearted tone and the numerous popular culture references. The ostensible question of opening deconstruction out onto the world (or, as the author prefers to say, to “emerging materialities” [p. 139]) is an important one; but the author does not really deal with it, preferring to fall back on rhetorical challenges to practitioners of cultural studies and to stand up for purity of deconstructive method.

The underlying polemic against contemporary figures such as Agamben, Badiou, Rancière and Žižek—a trend in philosophy that the author objects to for political and ethical reasons (a point of view to which he is, of course, entitled)—is also underdeveloped. Why not take on the issues of this debate head on from his own deconstructive vantage point? Instead of rapidly dispatching a critique of Martin Hägglund’s *Radical Atheism* in the second half of his introduction, why not discuss Hägglund’s position in one of his two chapters on Jean-Luc Nancy where issues of religion and atheism come up, and why

not develop this discussion further instead of embedding his (critical) analysis of Nancy in the details of the “iterative relation” between Derrida and Nancy?

By assuming a notion of deconstruction (if there is any), and insisting on the question of the future of deconstruction, he ends up putting himself in the position of defender of deconstructive method instead of committing himself to a clear view of what his own kind of deconstruction (de Manian, as much as Derridean) has to offer us as we grapple with the effects of global capitalism and technological transformations which are deconstructing our concepts faster than we can. It remains important—even vitally important—to read Derrida today, but perhaps we need more deconstruction *with* Derrida, more work of critically sifting through Derrida’s work to retrieve aspects of his thinking that can inform ours, without concern for being true to method, or with family quarrels, and with an eye keenly fixed on the ever changing “emerging materialities” (p. 139) that we face.

#### NOTES

[1] See, for example, Michael Nass, *Derrida From Now On* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), J. Miller, *For Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), Geoffrey Bennington, *Not Half No End: Militantly Melancholic Essays in Memory of Jacques Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), and Peggy Kamuf, *To Follow: The Wake of Jacques Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010). McQuillan, who wrote an earlier book on Paul de Man, published *Deconstruction after 9/11* (New York: Routledge, 2009) and published two edited volumes: *Deconstruction Reading Politics* (Palgrave: New York, 2008) and, with Ika Willis, *The Origins of Deconstruction* (Palgrave: New York, 2009).

[2] Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism, Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008).

[3] Henri Thomas, *Le Parjure* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994, first edition 1964).

[4] Martin McQuillan, *Deconstruction after 9/11* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 8.

[5] Martin McQuillan, Martin, ed., *The Politics of Deconstruction: Jacques Derrida and the Other of Philosophy* (London and New York: Pluto Press, 2007), p. 10.

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