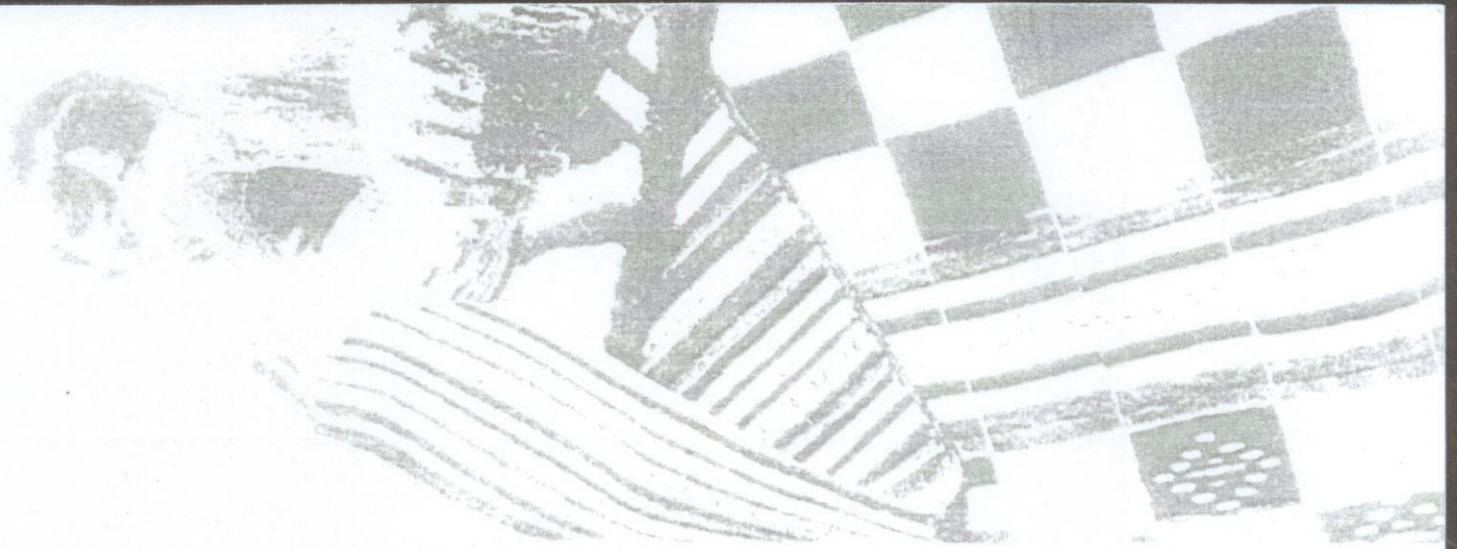


South African
Journal of

Philosophy

Volume 28
Number 1
2009



South African Journal of Philosophy

Volume 28 Number 1, 2009
SAJPEM 28(1):1-91 (2009)
ISSN 02580136

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Book Review

Review of Andrea Hurst, *Derrida Vis-à-vis Lacan. Interweaving Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008

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The rift between deconstructive philosophy and philosophical psychoanalysis that Derrida insisted upon in the 1960s, seems to be confirmed by the relatively little productive interchange between the two. Although supposedly both “poststructuralist”, this common denomination – as is often the case with poststructuralist thinkers – does not signal a celebrated common accord between these discourses, but rather mutual ignorance translating into interchanges that bear witness to clear misconstructions and unveiled resentment. In this dense yet perspicuous monograph, it is Andrea Hurst’s contention that the interface between deconstruction and psychoanalysis is consequently “at risk of becoming a limiting border rather than a permeable space of generative cross-fertilization” (p. 2). It is this “lack” in or “absence” of fruitful scholarly exchange that her attempt at “interweaving” deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis seeks to fill. And she does so masterfully, exhibiting expert erudition that furnishes her readers with illuminating introductions into core concepts belonging to the famously complex Lacanian and Derridean armoury. Although the merits of this tendentious intellectual labour is unquestionable, Hurst nevertheless runs the risk of flattening the undeniable differences separating Lacan and Derrida by way of an often one-sided excavation of “aporetic commonalities”. It is not for the sake of those underexposed differences that I want to take Hurst’s effort to task, however, but rather for the sake of the inadvertent textual effect produced by underscoring similarities. To this we shall return in due course.

One might wonder what precipitated this fissure between two discourses that, as Hurst argues, are intrinsically bound together by their Freudian heritage. The most obvious trigger seems to have been Derrida’s unequivocal – and never recanted – criticism of Lacan’s “Seminar on ‘The Purlined Letter’”. On Hurst’s account, the “letter” in Edgar Allan Poe’s detective story represents for Lacan the “Thing” (*Das Ding*) – that traumatic happening which occasions the tale in the first place – that can be read

as another avatar of what Lacan calls “the impossible Real”. The letter as event is graphically illustrated in Poe’s narrative by the fact that its readers are never enlightened as to its exact contents but are nevertheless left in no doubt that it is the bearer of ill tidings. Its mere arrival signals a transgression of the established order, such that the simple receipt of the letter already compromises the Queen’s honour and safety. Lacan also refers to the letter as the “pure signifier” that instigates a chain of signification, i.e. a chain of attached signs, all of which *strive* – without ever being fully able – to account for the signifier retroactively. Lacan proceeds to insist upon the *odd* “materiality” of the letter – a materiality that is indivisible: “Cut a letter in small pieces, and it remains the letter it is”. Here Lacan invokes “the impossible, immortal ‘wholeness’, ‘oneness’ or ‘singularity’ belonging to an as yet undetermined ‘thing’ or singular ‘it happens’” (p. 353). By its very nature, a “pure signifier” is symbol only of an absence – the absence of the kind of specifiable, measurable, determinable “content” that would supposedly anchor or order its subsequent linguistic interpretation. To be sure, this absence certainly is a particular content, but one that remains undisclosed. The letter is therefore neither something nor nothing, neither present nor absent: “we cannot say of the purlined letter that, like other objects, it must be *or* not be in a particular place but that unlike them it will be *and* not be where it is, wherever it goes” (ibid.). Put differently, when the letter reaches its destination, it will both be and not be there.

In his criticism, Derrida claims that Lacan’s insistence upon the indivisibility of the letter harbours a “closet essentialism”, i.e. it represents a fundamental idealisation (akin to one of Husserl’s eidetic structures) that supports a covert metaphysics of presence. According to deconstructive interpretation, as we know, the entire history of Western philosophy and its language and traditions has emphasised the desire for immediate access to meaning, and thus built a metaphysics or ontotheology around the privileging of presence over absence. Hurst quite easily unravels the axial argument of Derrida’s criticism by arguing, as we have seen above, that Lacan’s insistence upon the indivisibility of the letter does not evoke the Real as a “thing-in-itself” but rather in its unspeakable singularity. However one may divide the traumatic “event” up into “units” of understanding through analysis, the event remains excessive, inherently resistant to analytical, interpretative division. Derrida’s insistence upon the ineluctable divisibility of the letter refers to the fact that the “original/originary”, according to him, is not a substance but the scission and division of *différance*. Herein he is therefore not – as his criticism would suggest – in fundamental disagreement with Lacan, for they seem to be saying the same thing, albeit in different ways – about the Real. For the Real, according to Lacan, is a matter not of presence or absence but of splitting. The indivisibility of the letter therefore is not an insistence upon presence (or absence for that matter), but upon splitting – like a quantum particle split between both being and not being at its destination. In other words, Lacan promotes neither “lack” (absence) nor “phallus” (fullness) as transcendental signifieds. Rather, he insists upon the quasi-transcendental function of the Real, which is neither the absence nor the fullness of being, but, as Hurst claims, a fundamental splitting akin to *différance* (cf. p. 378).

Derrida’s persistent resistance against psychoanalysis seems all the more curious in light of this almost effortless invalidation of his Lacan-critique, the gist of which is employed by Hurst to argue in favour of an accord between their respective discourses on the basis of “a shared poststructural logic”: “the plural logic of the aporia”. Accord-

1 She also addresses the other axial claim supporting Derrida’s criticism, which concerns circular return.

ing to Hurst, "the style of thinking underpinning Lacanian psychoanalytic theory *precisely matches* the 'plural logic of the aporia' by which Derrida describes his own quasi-transcendental thinking" (p. 8, my emphasis). Opposing the "mutual antagonism" between these thinkers, Hurst compares "what the Lacanians say about Lacan with what the Derrideans say about Derrida" and curiously argues in favour of a "deep theoretical accord", a "mirroring symmetry" or, precise match" (ibid.), precisely in the name of the poststructuralist postulation of *différance* or "splitting". She justifies this rather paradoxical enterprise of eliminating differences in the name of difference, by insisting that it "would help clarify the field in which both operate" (ibid.) and provide a "key to a more productive interchange between deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis" (p. 11). The overall task of the study is therefore

"to demonstrate that both Derrida and Lacan carefully insist not only upon Kant's 'transcendental turn' but also on a second paradigm shift (reflected in Lacan's thinking of the 'impossible Real' and Derrida's equivalent thinking of *différance*) whereby transcendental thinking, which concerns itself with the conditions that make what is given in experience possible, becomes 'quasi-transcendental'. Quasi-transcendental thinking ... does not step beyond the transcendental paradigm but remains parasitic upon it even as it ruins it, by adding that economic conditions of possibility [of 'closure' or 'totality'] are simultaneously the very aneconomic conditions [of 'openness' or 'infinity'] that also make the given, strictly speaking, impossible" (p. 8).

Both deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis, then, embody the logic of such an aporetic (im)possibility from which there is no escape, neither by way of return to an ancient beginning nor by way of projection into a future ideal. Lacan's formulation of the Real as "rupture", for example, is characterised by an opposition between para-noiac universalism and hysterical nominalism, which "precisely matches" Derrida's distinction between the economic and aneconomic aporias – the choice between two equally unsatisfactory choices. Lacan cites "the mugger's choice" as example: your money or your life. This, of course, turns out to be no real choice at all, but rather a Hegelian lose/lose scenario: in choosing one the other is lost, but since they are interdependent, opting for one would be to lose the original choice ("for life", as Hurst shrewdly remarks, "is the necessary condition for having money, and, these days, money is the necessary condition for having a life"). For Lacan, the task of analysis is to guide the analysand beyond this lose/lose double bind – the aporias of para-noiac universalism and hysterical nominalism – to a third stance, the possibility of a win/win scenario: the revolutionary's choice between freedom or death. Ché Guevara risked all for the sake of freedom, whereas Socrates chose death rather than forsaking freedom. By choosing for decisive action, both retained eternal freedom. This "freedom for", then, is the only possible freedom, the paradoxical "freedom" attained through the refusal to submit to the constrictions of the either/or choice given by a binary determination of options, what Foucault dubbed the "Enlightenment blackmail", and the willingness therefore to face head on the double bind of the aporias, i.e. all the ethical, political and conceptual paradoxes and dilemmas that can neither be overcome nor evaded but must be worked through interminably (pp. 10-11).

Along this vein, Hurst establishes a family resemblance between "the two brothers" by demonstrating how this logic informs Derrida's reading of key Freudian texts, on the one hand, and how Lacan rereads Freud's texts in terms of a "structural logic" that

accords precisely with "the plural logic of the aporia". Herewith both brothers kill and rescue father Freud by reinventing him. Given this seemingly self-evident blood relation, then, why Derrida's stubborn recalcitrance when it came to Lacanian psychoanalysis? Hurst entertains Barbara Johnson's suggestion that Derrida might be less concerned with what Lacan's text says than with its textual effect (with how it is likely to be read), i.e. with the performative dimension of a reading. Derrida's concern would thus be this: "if Lacan insists that one cannot speak the truth unless one knows the conditions of the narration, then does he speak the truth if he does not explicitly mark and problematize the potential textual effects of the metaphysical baggage attached to the philosophical terms he imports into psychoanalytic discourse?" (p. 380). To my mind, Hurst's attempt to overrule Derrida's criticism risks the same irreverence to the textual effects of her own discourse.

If the raison d'être guiding Hurst's critical enterprise consists in the levelling off of differences between two historically rivalrous poststructuralist discourses, does it not in its textual effect or performative dimension go against the very grain of that *différance* or "splitting" – in whose name it speaks? Does not her crafty equation of Lacan and Derrida risk conveying a form of "closet essentialism" itself, insisting that the underlying and unchanging essence of quasi-transcendental thinkers is their respective attempts to articulate life's inevitable antagonisms not as contradictory oppositions within which either/or choices still make sense, but as dilemma, paradox, or *aporia* or even Borromean knots or Möbius strips, as the cover shows? It is the argument in favour of such an "isomorphic logic" then, that makes for both the strength and weakness of Hurst's achievement, which is sure to encourage the generative cross-fertilisation she hopes for.