

# REVIEWS

EDITOR: DAVID BROOKS

Paolo Bartoloni, *Interstitial Writing: Calvino, Caproni, Sereni, and Svevo*, Market Harborough, Leicestershire, UK: Troubador Publishing Ltd, 2003.

This short, complex and, in fact, quite remarkable book defines a space for literature within the matrix of post-structuralist and post-modern ideas about writing. Paolo Bartoloni talks about a writing—whether fiction or poetry—which can successfully respond to the antinomies within Heidegger's views of authentic and inauthentic being in language, which can respond to the ontological problems of self-presence in the act of composition and which is alert to the different orders of experience which occur within clock or calendar time, on the one side, and phenomenological time-awareness, on the other. These are large themes, whose nuances reach into many aspects of current debate about writing as a creative practice and reading as a critical practice. *Interstitial Writing* picks its way across this difficult field with great care, subtly and reflectively presenting an argument about the meaningfulness of contemporary literature. Bartoloni neither gives way to theory (especially post-modern theories which see writing as symptom and textual product) nor reaches for canonical, traditional defences of the status of literature. In those places where Bartoloni's is an abstract discussion, his method is, in part, a sustained querying of the nature of contemporary literature and its founding practices. What is it, Bartoloni asks, about the connection between writing and perception which initiates this skeptical practice of thinking in words? What is the movement between world and text in which a reflexive sense of literature (an engaged reflection on the nature of writing while actually engaged in writing) becomes integral to the writer's ability to imagine a world, to make things up, to create work which is informed and informing in a creative sense? In part, however, *Interstitial Writing* is a deeply informed, readerly exploration, an interweaving of various critical readings and comments in which Bartoloni's focus settles on the work of four modern Italian writers—the novelists Italo Svevo and Italo Calvino, and the poets Giorgio Caproni and Vittorio Sereni.

In their company Bartoloni aims, like Calvino's Mr Palomar, not only to see "what meaningful emptiness might look like" (35), but to see how writing makes things "visible" (a key word for Bartoloni). In short, he wants to see how writing brings the world (a world) into existence.

Clearly *Interstitial Writing* is addressed to issues in the philosophy of language, or, more narrowly defined, to issues within the hermeneutics tradition. Perhaps the book is best thought of, indeed, as a short philosophy essay on the theme of self, language and writing. Here, Calvino succinctly, and slightly wryly, defines the dominant two relevant tendencies in recent critical philosophy which most interest Bartoloni:

The first says, the world does not exist, only language exists. The second says, common language does not make sense; the world is ineffable. According to the first, the thickness of language operates above a world made of shadows; according to the second, it is the world which stands like a mute stone sphinx over a desert made out of words like sand carried by the wind. The first stream established its primary sources in the Paris of the last twenty-five years; the second flows from the beginning of the [20th] Century, departing from Vienna .... (45, from Italo Calvino's, *Lettera internazionale*, 2: 4-5)

Calvino concludes by saying that he believes in neither option, though clearly these two different views construct a framework for how he understands his own practice in fiction. As he puts it, these differing views "charm" him. And in a way they 'charm' Bartoloni, too, though his purpose is to define what happens creatively *between* those two unadopted options. He wants to find out what is the intermediate, creative position between the meaningless nature of words and the meaningless nature of things. Further, he wants to answer the question: why is this the space for literature? How is it the space which Blanchot, for instance, defines as a point "where time is lost, where one enters into the fascination and the solitude of time's absence" (35, citing from *The Space of Literature*) and which Bartoloni himself calls the place of the "unrepresentable", itself a place where tangibility and objectivity are lost?

Much of the book, in other words, studies the question of authorial presence and referentiality, most pertinently and effectively in his discussion of Svevo. This is the novelist who said of his inventions that they had "the insolence of living things" but whose reflexive, box-within-box structuring of the role of the author in his own work

deeply typifies writing's skepticism about its purchase on the real world. But this quality of connection and disconnection between reference and invention—a feature which Bartoloni calls both “in-between” and “boundless”—is exactly what fascinates the critic. His interest in reflexiveness of this kind is one of the first clues about how Bartoloni will later define interstitiality, or in-between-ness: namely, as a defiance of simple codes of reference and the conventional novel's simplistic checking off of what there is in the fiction when matched against what can be identified in an equivalent piece of the world. Bartoloni is quite explicit that the challenge of literature, a challenge which much published fiction cannot rise to, is the challenge of entering unknown territories and of writing “what is not there” in order to “create something from nothing”. Bartoloni's approach here is convincing and exemplary: he obviously is committed to a powerfully inventive idea of fiction writing, but he does not reduce the issue of invention to a psychological category. Entering the unknown is, first off, to do with language and the writer's relationship with language. If the writer's relationship with language is “open” (Bartoloni's term) then something of significance, including something significantly imagined, can appear in the work—as it does in Svevo and Calvino. Such fiction, too, will be able to realise (as a textual feature integrated into the reading experience) the multiplicity of time-dimensions which fiction inspires. The result will be not a de-legitimising of the sole, authentic self-in-writing, but the emergence of works where there is a complex play between ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ recordings of experience. For Bartoloni, the fictional point of entry is not merely experiential, or, for instance, biographical; the point of entry grows from each fiction writer's awareness of how language structures both world and word.

There is a deep engagement with phenomenological accounts of experience in *Interstitial Writing*, too. To an extent, this comes about because Bartoloni, unlike many critics who write about it, can take seriously what fiction does. “What fiction does”, he writes at one point, “is approach the silence and non-presentness of the world” (32). This Heideggerian concern about the ontological depth masked in the interconnection between word and thing deeply influences Bartoloni's thinking—in particular his concern, throughout the four interlinked essays which make up the book, with the pre-linguistic moment and the operability of latent ‘given’ senses of the world and experience. What fascinates him is, for instance, this sort of moment which he quotes from Calvino:

"All this is happening not on the sea, not in the sun," the swimmer Palomar thinks, "but inside my head, in the circuits between eyes and brain. I am swimming in my mind; this sword of light exists only there; and this is precisely what attracts me. This is my element, the only one I can know in some way." (39)

But Bartoloni resists the temptation to sink with his swimmer into reducing both meaning and that 'inside my head' to a meaningless ground of de-referenced language. Instead, he prefers to swim expertly in the moment of connection between world and language, risking the multitude of directions and connections the poem or novel might take. Similarly, this sense of multiple directionality in latent experience allows him to get interested in the micro-temporal moment of Heideggerian errancy, a feature of intimacy and detail no less than of straying, which he explores insightfully in relation to a number of poems by Vittorio Sereni. Bartoloni writes of how Sereni's poems offer

a narrative landscape on which ... atemporal erring and wandering time are captured for a fraction of a moment, just long enough to allow the poet some precious time to observe and linger, to pause, to sit still with the omnipresent time. (84)

As in Mr Palomar's swimming, Bartoloni's attention is captured by moments of phenomenological integration, by the immersedness of self in the world and by an experience of writing as a creative practice which comes into play—in fact, can only come into play—as a feature of that intersection of self, senses and world. Sereni, he suggests at one point, is a poet who wants to "switch time off", and to fix and crystallise the movement of present into past and present into future through intense acts of attentiveness to complex and prismatic detail.

In many ways, Bartoloni's reading of Sereni is the prelude for one of the most important ideas that *Interstitial Writing* develops in relation to the in-between nature of literary writing and the complex relationship between writing and time. Bartoloni's engagement with time goes back to the Blanchotian notion that to write is to exit from time. Clearly, this is not meant (by either Blanchot or Bartoloni) in the most common sense in which 'exiting time' appears in literary criticism—i.e. the writer's claim to immortality. Nor can it be straightforwardly positioned in the neoclassical poetic tradition of *Exegi monumentum aere perennius*—i.e. of works which outlast and

resist time because of the resolved nature of their structure, theme and diction. No less clearly, however, these famously ambitious claims for writing are not unconnected with the much more psychologically inflected, intimate and threshold moment of Blanchot's absence of time, around which the creative act of writing pivots. For Bartoloni, however, this absence has to be developed in a direction which I would term less psychological than it is ethical; or perhaps more accurately phrased, time's absence in writing becomes an attitude, a mind set, which must inevitably subtend what a writer does and which reaches so deeply into the writer's own relationship with language that it becomes almost a feature of life itself, of biography, of the writer's literal experience.

As this theme starts to emerge in *Interstitial Writing*, Bartoloni begins to speak of it as an immersion in time which requires what he calls "waiting". He writes compellingly about the idea of agency in travelling, being particularly fascinated by those writers who say that they travel without agency, like Calvino's Palomar, or those figures who travel without linear memory like the poet Caproni. Caproni, he comments approvingly, wanted to travel without a destination. But the psychological, and to a degree the ethical, consequence is what Caproni so blindingly states in his poem "Experience" (80):

All the places I have seen,  
I have visited,  
now I know—I am certain of it:  
I have never been there.

Distention, time's passage—what Bartoloni calls the purely adjectival nature of the "now"—make sure of that, requiring that the poet live in a space of no-space, a time of no-time. It is a time, in other words, of "waiting", not only a time of loss and enforced isolation (isolation of the kind which Sereni, for example, experienced as a prisoner of war). Rather it is a waiting which denies the possibility of movement and action and therefore denies the very facet of experience on which the given "visibility: of the world is predicated: it denies, in other words, the possibility for movement to "enact a mimetic narration of the temporal process" (85). Whatever the given, visible stories are, of course, what has already been said, what has already been spoken; as such, they deny precisely the 'inventiveness' which this book so outstandingly wishes to celebrate. They deny that state of no separation, no boundary, no desire to interpret, which is crucial to creativity and is what distinguishes literature from other types of

writing. Waiting is a detour, a zig-zag, which operates in the "undifferentiated and non-directional time of a space that can be inhabited by remaining still" (86). It is a state of pure possibility.

As Bartoloni himself notes, waiting is not unlike another of Blanchot's terms, *l'attente*, and perhaps borrows from Levinas's concept of *entretemps* ('meanwhile'). But in Bartoloni's hands, waiting becomes more explicitly a term which defines the state of potentiality in the process of writing. Bartoloni invokes a practice which engages with language as a medium latent with meanings and suspensions of meaning. As he puts it, he is less concerned that literary work might cease to "say" something than that it is able to "be" (86). Ultimately, it is possible that this argument returns us to the heartland of modernist literary practices, ultimately to the claim that each work must invoke itself as a specific, utterly singular instance, enacting its own meaning in aesthetic isolation. How far away is Bartoloni, for instance, from Wallace Stevens' take upon poetry as the slow coming into being of the "bright obvious" (in the poem "Man Carrying Thing") or his notion of the writer as a "metaphysician in the dark, twanging/ An instrument" (in *Of Modern Poetry*)?

That said, the great achievement of this short book is that it argues the case for the literary work as something apart from, or different from, writing which reflects, imitates or represents the world untroublingly. With particular reference to the work of the poet Caproni, for instance, Bartoloni describes the interstitial zone as "devoid of already given, present images" (65), i.e. the images which most writing automatically gives us. Rather the interstitial is a space filled with the sense of a presence which, as he puts it, "cannot be seen"—in other words, a presence which only writing will make visible or leave visibly invisible. More, *Interstitial Writing* does not fudge the question of whether there are specific philosophical relationships with language which have to be in place for the writer to write meaningfully in a literary sense. Bartoloni does not reduce the way that the writer works with language into a 'creative practice', or a psychological state of mind, in which writing all too often ends up as secondary symptom or ideological product. He does something very necessary, indeed quite confronting, where contemporary writing is concerned: he takes for granted that literature does not reduce to text and, by implication, that all cultural phenomena do not reduce to equivalent kinds of textuality. Instead, he explores key aspects of the philosophical paradigm at work in significant literary

writing. He studies the inventive terms which operate between the world and the creative work. It is indeed rare to find a critic who does that traditional activity of the critic, viz. to draw our attention to writing which we may not yet know or may have overlooked as significant examples of contemporary experience, but who can so successfully conceive of critical writing as part of a highly original investigation into ideas, both his authors' ideas and his own.

Martin Harrison

Brian Massumi (ed.): *A Shock to Thought: Expression after Deleuze and Guattari*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002.

How have Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari changed the way we think about expression? Brian Massumi's edited collection, *A Shock to Thought: Expression after Deleuze and Guattari*, takes a cross-section of scholarly work in an attempt to find out how their ideas are being digested in the academy.

The book is divided into three parts, which could be roughly characterised as aesthetics, the non-human, and the 'forces of expression'. The subjects range from familiar philosophical territories of modernity and ethics to meditations on Antonin Artaud, Prince and the choreographer Merce Cunningham. The choice of essayists is just as varied: from the established scholars Michael Hardt and Steven Shaviro to several up-and-coming doctoral students. Massumi, a wily and well-published Deleuzian scholar at the Université de Montréal, denies that there is any unifying theme to this collection; they merely represent different expressions of thought. Or, more truthfully, different thoughts about expression.

Massumi's introduction makes it clear from the outset that 'expression' here is not to be understood in its narrow sense, as a form of communication, but as Deleuze and Guattari interpreted it, as a creative force. In their words, "the world does not exist outside its expressions"; expression is a productive energy that moulds the world, the human body and its perceptions. Massumi focuses on these productive forces in his opening remarks, rather than following the usual etiquette of introducing his contributors. He riffs on the

concept of expression as a force, akin to a lightning strike or a virus, which shocks the flesh and moves to the next host body.

If, for a moment, we dare to describe the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari themselves as a virus, then *A Shock to Thought* represents two common symptomologies of the pandemic. There are those who use the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari to open up a philosophical question or a creative terrain, and throw new light on their topic while also speaking to a wider audience. Then there are those that assume a deep familiarity with all the works they discuss, and only speak to others within the field of Deleuze and Guattari studies. For everyone apart from die-hard Deleuzians, the former are more successful, and fortunately this collection has several good examples to offer.

The first three essays reflect on the nature of aesthetics—and while they are very different in tone and approach, as a triumvirate they work very well. Melissa McMahon, in a dense but assured contribution, aims to locate the difference between beauty and the sublime, navigating Immanuel Kant and Walter Benjamin via Deleuze and Guattari. McMahon begins with a poignant evocation of procrastination, but her writer's block dissolves into a thorough and insightful critique of the sublime. In a lighter tone, Steven Shaviro uses Prince's much under-rated film *Under a Cherry Moon* to demonstrate his analytic of the beautiful, in all its showy immanence. Stephen Zagala completes this series with a more traditional analysis, re-interpreting the work of the homosexual artist Mathew Jones in light of Deleuze and Guattari's claim that aesthetics is a precondition for ethical activity.

The second section of the collection, titled "The superior empiricism of the human", lacks the cohesion of the first, and the results are more uneven. There are moments of brilliance here, and particular mention must go to Michael Hardt's effort. In a remarkable piece of writing, we move from Pasolini's poem on the crucifixion to Hardt's analysis of Christ's incarnation as flesh—a suggestion that the transcendent is better understood as "residing within the material", as a body exposed:

The surfaces of the world are charged with a powerful intensity. Divinity resides precisely in the boundaries or thresholds of things, at their limits, passionate and exposed, as if surrounding them with a halo. (p.79)

Paul Bains chooses to tackle the notion of subjectivity and the difficulty of the Deleuze and Guattarian project to "think that which cannot be thought and to write the unreadable". Bains is even

prepared to take the mickey out of the more incomprehensible results of Deleuze and Guattari's tendency toward the 'unreadable':

A self-referential, autopoietic immanence that is not immanence *to* something (as to a purely ideal transcendent, ego-onto-theological plane or Subject/Eye) but rather an autopoietic or self-producing/positing immanence *of* subjectivity. A plane of immanence or consistency 'which has no supplementary dimension to that which transpires upon it.' A what?!

Despite this seeming impenetrability, Bains unpacks these complex notions of subjectivity into something approximating a theory of the subject. His arguments are lucid and readable, and all the more enjoyable for the occasional joke.

Gary Genosko's answer to the thorny "relationship between territoriality and expression" is to look to the crustacean. He quotes from Deleuze and Guattari that "God is a lobster, or a double-pincer, a double bind", and asks what (and where) this cosmic lobster might be. While Genosko's greater argument may be elusive (like the lobster?), there is something strangely charming and illuminating in his perspective, particularly as regards Deleuze and Guattari's notions of the non-human.

Catherine Dale's examination of Antonin Artaud's theatre of cruelty and Deleuze and Guattari's 'schizoanalytic' alternative mode of thought is less approachable. This is a relentlessly close reading of Artaud as understood by Deleuze and Guattari, and she assumes considerable familiarity with all the texts in question. Readers in that category will find notes of interest in her analysis of Deleuze on masochism, madness and alcoholism. José Gil offers a very detailed essay on Merce Cunningham, which also seems to speak most to those already writing about Deleuze and movement.

Alan Bourassa attempts to decipher the relationship between language, literature and the human, and defines "six modalities of the non-human". Although this is promising ground, his argument that the novel is the site where language and the human form their strongest alliance is somewhat unconvincing. Apparently, poetry more often concerns itself with the other-than-human, film with "raising physical objects to a new level of expressiveness" and plays don't even rate a mention.

The third and final section of the collection contains some gems. Aden Evens provides a fascinating glimpse into the relationship

between expression and recording in music. Evens uses Deleuze and Guattari as the basis for his provoking argument about why CDs lack the expressive potential of vinyl LPs—for those who needed further convincing.

Virtual reality may be more readily considered as one of the 20th century's less successful inventions, but Andrew Murphie moves beyond the goggles and data gloves to ask broader questions about our increasing ability to operate in 'the virtual' and how we express our relationship to the real. He constructs a sprawling, operatic essay that moves confidently from philosophy and media theory to music and differential calculus.

The most explicitly political essay of the collection comes from Mani Haghighi, who re-reads the events surrounding the *fatwa* issued against Salman Rushdie in 1988. Haghighi asks if Rushdie's supporters didn't critically misunderstand the status of the *fatwa* as yet another instance of violent fundamentalism, when he claims it was actually 'the gift of death'—outside the performative arena of protest. However, one is tempted to question how this Deleuzian reading of a *fatwa* could have improved matters for Rushdie as he was scuttling between hotels with his armed guards in tow.

Massumi's collection concludes with an essay from Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger and a short interview with Guattari from 1989. Ettinger provides a highly erudite and concentrated series of arguments on psychoanalysis, art and 'holes'—the repressed ideas that provide the basis for art. She moves beyond Deleuze's argument that the artist is the doctor of the world, and argues that the artist is both patient and doctor, losing mind and spirit to his or her work, while also providing therapy to the broader culture. Reproductions of her own paintings provide an accompaniment to the essay, and provide the only concession to the visual in the book.

*A Shock to Thought* is a valuable, if uneven, offering in a world where books on Deleuze and Guattari tend to be either cribs or critiques (see, in the latter category, the compelling new book by Slavoj Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences*). This is neither. Instead, Massumi takes us on a wide-ranging tour of some of the more exemplary academic efforts that touch on key arguments in the Deleuze and Guattari conceptual universe.

*Kate Crawford*

'Routledge Critical Thinkers: Essential Guides for Literary Studies', London: Routledge, 2003:

Simon Malpas, *Jean-François Lyotard*  
Lee Spinks, *Friedrich Nietzsche*  
Nicholas Royle, *Jacques Derrida*

In an inspired passage in his *The Corrections* (2001), Jonathan Franzen has his suddenly penurious, thirty-something, 'hip' ex-academic Chip Lambert make repeated trips to the Strand bookstore in Manhattan, laden with 'Theory'. First to go are the Marxists:

The books were in their original jackets and had an aggregate list price of \$3,900. A buyer at the Strand appraised them casually and delivered his verdict: 'Sixty-five' .... By the beginning of October ... he'd sold his feminists, his formalists, his structuralists, his poststructuralists, his Freudians, and his queers.

Everything must go! In the general meltdown of critical values and practices since 1989, Chip's bargain-basement liquidation of 'Theory' has a cruelly emblematic status for those of us whose bookshelves still groan under the weight of that fast-receding promise of a radical critique.

What are we to do with Theory? It has been thirty-six years since the *annus mirabilis* of post-structuralism. In 1967, on the eve of the upheavals of *soixante-huit*, one of the great events in post-War French intellectual history took place: the back-to-back publication of three works by a young Jacques Derrida. These three works—*L'écriture et la différence*; *La voix et le phénomène*; *De la grammatologie*—constituted an 'event' not simply due to the febrile critical intelligence animating them, but more importantly because of the sudden shift they signalled from both structuralist and Marxist theoretical paradigms. The return to, or detour through, Nietzsche and Heidegger that Derrida had conspicuously made both fashionable and essential in these works, opened up a seam for further theoretical mining at least as rich as (and subterraneously linked to) Foucault's "archaeology" or Deleuze's "sense". So what happened?

Since 1989 'and all that', with the passing away of High Theory, of post-structuralism and every other 'ism' that emerged in concert with it, we find ourselves in an epoch far removed from the theoretical enthusiasms of the 1970s and institutionalisations of the 1980s.

This is, to put it bluntly, the era of the *study guide*, the 'companion', the anthology, and the 'critical reader'. It is an era seemingly incapable of generating its own theoretical or critical break, and has settled instead for the endless recycling and simplification of all the previous breaks and decisive turns in the history of Western thought. Nowhere is our relatively flaccid intellectual culture more glumly on display than in series such as Routledge's "Critical Thinkers", "essential guides for literary studies".

A glance at the series preface, by Robert Eaglestone, makes perfectly clear the paper-thin, 'democratic' veneer of a publishing venture of this sort. Of course, the entire enterprise is aimed at the bewildered fee-paying student, who, at the prospect of a series of short and affordable books placing "key thinkers and their ideas firmly back in their contexts", is meant to fetch a sigh of grateful relief before drafting that stalled essay on *Big Brother*. It's a thought at which any teacher will rightly quail; and, sure enough, the expected equivocation is proffered:

To read only books on a thinker, rather than texts by that thinker, is to deny yourself a chance of making up your own mind. [Indubitably! But wait...] Sometimes what makes a significant figure's work hard to approach is not so much its style or content as the feeling of not knowing where to start. The purpose of these books is to give you a 'way in' by offering an accessible overview of these thinkers' ideas and works and by guiding your further reading ....

So we make up our own mind on the basis of a "way in" and some "guidance" from a short book that, as Eaglestone candidly confesses, "offers its own 'spin'." And that "spin" is really nothing less than the entire content of the books, which are wholly concerned with interpreting and evaluating the thinker in question. Not just 'content' either: in deference to what Eaglestone calls the "high technology education systems of the twenty-first century", a rigidly standardised form is instituted. The books proceed according to a fixed sequence of sections: "WHY X?"; "KEY IDEAS OF X"; "AFTER X"; and "FUTHER READING". Which is evidently as much to say that the 'high-tech twenty-first century education systems' of the day are churning out identi-kit graduates with little or no imagination or ability to range outside the box (and yes, 'info-boxes' are a dismayingly standard feature of the series).

The bad faith here is distressing. A cheap publishing venture premised on the extraction and explication of the 'key ideas' of any true philosopher is of the greatest disservice to philosophy itself. Philosophical ideas are not and have never been paraphrasable entities, they are laboured products of a style. Students reared on a diet of sound-bites will not only fail to develop a respect for the philosophical tradition, but will produce bad, one-dimensional thought themselves. And the editors and authors of each of these volumes (intelligent men and women all!) know this implicitly; yet, with the grim *mauvaise foi* of two conspiring cynical imperatives ('publish or perish' and 'better us than them') they circle the wagons and carry on regardless. In Simon Malpas' inert and almost violently boring book on Jean-Francois Lyotard (himself, to be fair, quite insufferably devoid of interest), we are treated to an 18-line 'box' on 'HEGEL'. All told, within the form, it isn't a bad stab; the perfidy consists in the very rationale that would make an 18-line treatment of Hegel necessary or *conceivable* in the first place. An 18-line summary of Hegel is simply and *a priori* false. And a series built of such summaries, indeed, nailed together out of them, is itself, *ipso facto*, false.

Authorship of texts such as these is perfectly understandable for early career academics, young lecturers looking to beef up their publication records; and one passes swiftly over the books on Nietzsche and Lyotard. There isn't really a striking observation or phrase between them; just a legion of sentences beginning "According to Lyotard ...", "Lyotard argues that ...", "Nietzsche's position ..." and "Throughout Nietzsche's work ...". 'Key ideas' immediately become sodden conceptual tissue in this stylistic terrain. In Malpas' book in particular, the prose betrays the cynicism of its conception in a style reminiscent of legal minutes. "Metanarratives" have been "destroyed"; "there is no longer any unifying identity for the subject or society" (Malpas, 29). Ho-hum. "In contrast to other post-modernist writers ... Lyotard insists on the importance of paying attention to the signs of history" (Malpas, 85). Well, la-de-da.

In some insidious way, this kind of treatment is perfectly in order for its subject. Lyotard, the least readable, least serious and least interesting of any of the 'men of 68', is probably better served by this sort of mummification than any more electrified engagement: who would wish to read him after this? And yet, it should be said that Malpas tries to make his subject *more* interesting than he actually is; not stylistically, to be sure, but by attributing to Lyotard an ongoing

critical and political engagement with something called “capitalism”. Scour the source texts as I may, I still can find no reference to anything going by that name, other than in dismissive references to Marxism. “Economic liberalism”, yes; and “liberal democracy”, no question; but when Malpas writes that, “For Lyotard, the global spread of capitalism and the rapid developments in science and technology since the Second World War have put an end to grand narratives” (28), he is not only putting words into Lyotard’s mouth, but putting a distinctly more *engagé* spin on *La condition postmoderne* than any I have seen. Nor does Malpas pay much attention to the fact that Lyotard himself later disowned this intellectually dishonest and inexplicably overrated text as a work of academic charlatanism (“I made up stories, I referred to a quantity of books I’d never read, apparently it impressed people, it’s all a bit of a parody .... It’s simply the worst of my books, they’re almost all bad, but that one’s the worst”—*Lotta Poetica*, Third Series, Vol 1, No 1 (January 1987), p. 82). Indeed, to the very extent that Malpas has elevated this work and the whole question of the “postmodern” to the very cornerstone of Lyotard’s work (*L’économie libidinale* is over with in two pages...) it both misrepresents and clinches the nature of Lyotard’s career: ignored for his unpleasant and derivative *actual* philosophy, he is only considered ‘important’ for a text that he himself dismissed as rubbish. Rehearsing Lyotard’s Kantian musings on history, Malpas concedes that “[a]ll one is left with is the recognition that there is progress, that something must happen and be responded to” (83)—a theoretical reflection with all the sizzle of damp baking soda. And that, effectively, is the extent of the philosophical achievement on show here. Why Lyotard indeed!

I have neither the space nor the inclination to ruminate at any length on Lee Spinks’s more solid and stylistically superior, but ultimately rather conservative book on Nietzsche: one cannot resist the feeling that the great aphorist and stylist deserves considerably better than this, but the standardisation of the volume’s form has severely curtailed what one suspects may have been a much more courageous and adventurous effort on Spinks’s part.

No, the great curiosity here is why Nicholas Royle (the author of previous texts on Derrida, E. M. Forster and “the uncanny”) should have condescended to write the volume dedicated to Derrida. Let’s be clear from the first that condescension is very much the name of the game; witness these inelegant periods triggered by the key opening question:

The question 'Why Derrida?' is absurd: it makes me smile. There is something at once appalling and hilarious about it. It is like asking 'Why culture?', 'Why education?', 'Why think?' (Royle, 8)

I trust that we may be forgiven for inquiring of Professor Royle, amidst all this hilarity, exactly how and when Derrida became comparable to, indeed on a par with, culture, education and thought? This feels to me like the mocking condescension of a senior priest to his circle of novices who are as yet unacquainted with the sacred mysteries, and who are fed some unearned 'in-laughter' to kick-start the process of conversion.

What is most telling, however, is that this rhetorical tactic, of stringing together nouns associated with the proper noun "Derrida" as though they were equivalent, rapidly becomes the key strategy of the book. In Royle's hands, deconstruction is more or less the law of the supplement, which is more or less interchangeable with the notions of "text", *différance*, the generalized quotation mark, the aporia, and literature; and ultimately (wait for it), all of these are somehow directly not just associated, but *identified* with "democracy", "justice" and "love". "Deconstruction is love" (136), we are told, in a final, ghastly clinching of this logic of equivalence orchestrating the entire book. Listing five "supplementary" remarks on the notion of the supplement, Royle advises: "Each of these remarks supplements, spills over into, stands in for each of the others" (56). This seems a travesty of deconstruction to me, which precisely never properly allows anything to stand for anything else; but insists, stubbornly, on those differences that make each supplement singular and irreducible to all the others, no matter how 'iterable' it is. There is a real philosophical problem here; Derrida's use of the present participle of the verb 'to be' never resorts to the conservatism of *identity*. In Derrida's hands, the 'is' becomes a playful conjunction, even a disjunction, an unnerving predication of being in language that is constantly outflowing and never stabilising into a fixed image. For Royle, however, the 'is' of identity is forever threatening to steal over the conceptual landscape, in which night, unfathomably, all cows are black again.

What Royle properly calls "the open-ended chain of 'non-synonymous substitutions'" (71) is nevertheless rudely forced, by a prose style less playful and more authoritarian than it wants to be, into a rigid chain of synonyms. Eventually one wonders exactly what

the book is pretending to teach—there is nothing new under the sun; deconstruction is not a peculiar way of doing things with conceptual and narrative systems, it is just “love” and “democracy” after all.

As I have tried to demonstrate, Derrida’s notion of writing—linked to his notions of trace, remainder, supplement, difference and text—radically alters the bases on which we might think about thinking, consciousness, presence, being, humanity, animality, divinity, identity, intention, decision, responsibility, justice, friendship, desire, memory, death and language, as well as about so many discourses or practices. (144)

I wonder. This sentence, from the very end of the book, is perfectly indicative of the thrust of the whole: on the one hand, it renders equivalent and therefore rather uninteresting all the many, delicate conceptual instruments and ‘personae’ in Derrida’s desk drawer; and on the other, it seeks to apply them to *everything* in “an unending series of earthquakes” (144). Well, an unending series of earthquakes has stopped being an emergency; it has stopped being anything of note; it is simply the way things are. Stripping Derrida of his occasional and interventionist role, modifying his concepts into the way things just democratically and lovingly are, in a state nevertheless described as one “of war”, is divesting him of everything remotely ‘radical’.

There is a little blurb on the back cover of Royle’s book, which purports to be “praise for this volume from Jacques Derrida”. The blurb reads: “Excellent, strong, clear and original”. I suppose I am permitted to “love” that this is not a sentence, and that it predicates nothing in particular. It is a chain of ‘non-synonymous substitutions’ unfixed by any verb to anything. Yes, ‘excellent’, ‘strong’, ‘clear’, ‘original’; this is certainly ‘praise’, but it is no more ‘for this volume’ or ‘from Jacques Derrida’ than Royle’s gushing encomia inside the covers of the book (Derrida is variously “astonishing”, “remarkable”, “extraordinary” and “the most important thinker of our time”) are ‘to Jacques Derrida’ or (even faintly) ‘critical’. Royle is to be congratulated for stepping around and playing with the deadly format of the series; and will doubtless have achieved something positive if even one student comes away from a reading of his text with a will to read Derrida. But he comes dangerously close, all too often, to making deconstruction seem banal and obvious, or even worse, of suggesting that *it has been these things all along*. When he quotes Derrida saying

"I do not believe that one lives on post-mortem" (7); or speculates that, "faced with the ghostliness of Derrida's shopping list, we must reckon with the sense that there might be nothing to it, in it or on it (no 'contents') and/or that it might in fact be endless, an interminable shopping list" (83), I can't help feeling that the game is being given away: *who really cares?* And when he writes that "Differance is perhaps not a word, not really, not properly, not quite: it is not Derrida's, but it is not Nietzsche's, or Freud's, or Heidegger's either" (76), I declare that my patience is at an end. I want to borrow some of these "not"s and marry them to the adjectives attributed to Derrida on the back cover. There are plenty to spare.

My advice after enduring these three irrelevant books is perfectly simple: follow Chip Lambert to the Strand and snap up the Real Thing at a discount. Derrida and Nietzsche are verbal artists of the first order, and will always repay a dedicated reading, even in translation. However, if you do come across an old copy of *The Post-modern Condition*, move quickly on. If that text ends up being one casualty of Theory's crisis, perhaps there will be hope after all.

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