

Jean-Paul Martinon, "Switzerland: Joanna Hodge's *Derrida On Time*," in *Radical Philosophy* 149 (May/June 2008), 62-64, © Radical Philosophy, 2008.

Can one address time? Can one write a book *On Time*? At one point in her book, Joanna Hodge quotes Derrida's very own acknowledgement of the problematic of addressing the issue of time. On the one hand, as it were, there is a will to name and a determination to think the issue of time and on the other, there is the activity of thinking time, there is desire, the time spent articulating time. There is then according to Derrida, here quoted from Hodge, a "gap between, on the one hand, thought, language, and desire and, on the other hand, knowledge, philosophy, science... a gap between gift and economy" (p. 67). Now what interests Derrida in this gap is neither to proclaim an adoring abdication to what exceeds the limits of experience, knowledge, science, and economy nor to dwell in an astringent philosophical logic about time unconnected and unconcerned with the body that desires, names and thinks this logic. Derrida's aim is to respond as faithfully and as rigorously as possible to both the injunction of thinking and the injunction of meaning (presence, science, knowledge). In other words, his aim is at once to give and to know. As he says: "Know still what giving wants to say, know how to give, know what you want and want to say when you give, know what you intend to give, know how the gift annuls itself, commit yourself even if commitment is the destruction of the gift by the gift, give economy its chance." (Derrida, *Given Time*, 1992, p. 30.) What is then Hodge's gift? How has Hodge managed to bridge Derrida's gap? How has she managed to involve her body, her desires, and the logic of her and Derrida's articulations in order to achieve an unexpected and yet logically conclusive articulation of or on time today?

Joanna Hodge's book, *Derrida On Time* is an exploration of Derrida's understanding of time as a series of responses to Kant and Husserl. This exploration also highlights other sources in Derrida's thinking of time: Freud,

Heidegger, Levinas, Blanchot, Benjamin, etc. These references are not classified or analysed individually, they are understood as chance encounters in Derrida's continual reading of Kant and Husserl. Hodge's analysis is therefore a way of revealing how these other sources have helped Derrida to block, deflect, and reroute more conventional interpretations of both Kant and Husserl's work on time. Overall, this attention to Derrida's reading of Husserl and Kant aims to show that he surprisingly spend a lot of time erasing the very significant role that their work had on his understanding of time. As Hodge says in relation to Husserl: "Th[e] line of descent (drawn out by Derrida of his influences) erases the very significant role which a continuing engagement with the phenomenology of Husserl plays in Derrida's thinking about time and meaning." (p. 87) In doing so, Hodge aims to show that these previous philosophers often remain a "scarcely erased trace" in Derrida's work.

In order to give an idea of the complexity of Hodge's undertaking, I would like to focus exclusively on three particular issues, which I feel are crucial when it comes to read Hodge's book. These three specific issues should be seen as three undeveloped (for lack of space) argument/questions to Hodge, a way to invite the reader interested in these issues to reflect on Hodge's remarkable exploration of Derrida's understanding of time.

First argument/question to Hodge: One of Hodge's main claim is that with Husserl and Derrida, "time is to be thought no longer as linear, but as curved, and that matter and its materiality are organised in accordance with asymmetrical relations arising from such curvature." (p. ix) Now what can "curved" actually mean and should we not reflect on the meaning of this curvature?

The idea that time is no longer understood as a surmised line of continuous development from some notional beginning to some equally notional end point is incontestable. Ever since philosophers have begun rethinking Hegels' work, time and history can no longer be conceived as linear. Husserl's phenomenology has

helped us understand that no thinking and therefore no thought content, especially when it comes to issues relating to time, can take such a form. We are always already thinking by making loops, hesitations, precipitations, reversals, and our thought contents not only has to follow these unruly turns, they also have to take into consideration chance encounters and contingent events. One of the most well known characteristics of Derrida's work is that his writing precisely follows these loops, hesitations, swerves, changes of speed, and u-turns; and that any attempt to re-constitute his work clean of these breaks is futile. The issue is therefore how can one characterise the time of Derrida as being singularly "curved"? What does it mean that time has now a rounded or bending shape instead of a linear strategy based on a before and an after and a transitory "now"? Even curved, does thinking and thought content still follow a "before" (a before Derrida), an "after" (an after Derrida) and a middle-point (Hodge) from which one can contemplate a curve?

The issue is a difficult one and Hodge tries hard to make sure that the syncopation of non-simultaneity, which is characteristic of Derrida's work never returns to a linear figuration which would undermine her carefully constructed arguments. But the question remains. The textual strategy developed by Derrida is at once and undecidably linear and interruptive. This allows a rethinking of the asymmetry between past and future in the tense structure of language and a radical questioning of the conceptualisation of time. The issue is therefore not whether this textual strategy ends up creating a curved understanding of time in the way that Hodge wants us to believe, but whether we are now finally at a stage where we should really be asking whether this strategy of loops, changes of speed, and u-turns is not in desperate need of a deconstructive move. In other words, do we still need another repetition of Derrida's textual strategy; should we not think, in order to remain faithful to Derrida's work, of coming up with a radical reinvention, a reinvention that would prevent us from thinking time simply as curved?

Second argument/question to Hodge: The title of Hodge's book is *Derrida On Time* without comma, hyphen, or colon between proper name and topic. The aim is clear: this is not a book about the timeliness of Derrida's views on time, but about Derrida's views on time. The scope is thus enormous. Not only does it bring together Derrida's work, it also puts forward his many predecessors' attempt to make sense of this topic. The question is this: Isn't a book titled "Derrida on Time," not precisely a humanly impossible attempt? Can anyone truly write about Derrida on time?

This is not a text book or a book suitable for undergraduates. The complexity of the prose, the difficulty of the arguments, the subtlety of the articulation remains inaccessible to most non-Derridean/Husserlian scholars. As such, it does not claim to be a comprehensive and accessible account of such a complex topic. It therefore can only claim to reconstitute Derrida's views on time in one interweaving set of arguments bound in a small black book. Derrida's extraordinary textual proliferation on such a diverse topic is thus reduced to various distinct domains of entities (mostly grounded in interactions with previous philosophers) that aspire to be fully retrievable from Derrida's finite articulations on this topic. The title and Hodge's undertaking therefore puts forward the idea that there is in Derrida's work, and indeed perhaps in the wider philosophical remit of deconstruction, an eidetic structure of time that is potentially comprehensible by all.

Should we not then here raise certain doubts about the possibility of thinking Derrida on time? Does anyone have the capacity to coordinate the divergent strands of Derridean thought that open up a different understanding of time and its mode of presentation? This does not mean that the corpus of Derrida's work is infinite and unaccountable. This simply means that, if one follows Derrida's gift and logic, there must be a fundamental impossibility of thinking Derrida on time, not because of its diversity, its incoherencies, its betrayals, or its unacknowledged sources, but because his work goes precisely against the very

possibility of pinning down what “on time” might actually mean. At one stage of her mediations, Hodge rightly quotes Heidegger’s famous reflection on the impossibility of addressing the essence of time:

“All these descriptions of time, known both to the common as well as the philosophical understandings, cannot have been simply arbitrary fabrications and inventions. The essence of time must itself make these kinds of conceptions possible and even plausible. Yet none of them touches exactly the metaphysical essence of time” (H: *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, p. 198) (p. 117)

Is Hodge not trying to do exactly what Heidegger feared precisely of doing: writing and thinking in terms of an eidetic reduction of time to an essence: *On Time*? Hodge is obviously aware of this problem. The quotation itself is enough proof of this. However, her solution, the method at which she attempts to reinvent Derrida on time is where I feel, questions need to be raised. Although it is true that Hodge is not claiming completeness or comprehensiveness, there is still under the naming function of Derrida on Time (not unlike that of Husserl and Heidegger) an internally consistent desire (gift) for totalisation, even if this totalisation is deliberately structured in an open and non-finite series of redeployments and re-readings. So the question persists: can an attempt entitled *Derrida on Time* be humanly possible? In other words, can the gift that Derrida has left us be at all reduced to an economy of time that encompasses both its temporalization and its temporization in a textual narrative?

Third argument/question to Hodge: Hodge’s tacit conclusion appears to be that in his work on time Derrida always sought a middle ground, “a neutral position” (p. ix) between all his predecessors’ moves to make sense of time. This conclusion comes back with an insistent regularity throughout Hodge’s book, but is never developed—understandably—in an overarching conclusion. Now, is it fair to reduce Derrida’s to such neutrality?

The accusation of neutrality is common amidst detractors of Derrida, especially when it comes to politics. The litany is without fail that Derrida only seeks to remain neutral between the religious and non-religious, between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and worst of all, between various philosophical engagements and arguments. So when it comes to his account of time, it is obvious to fall to this generally accepted view of neutrality. Complying with this view, Hodge writes: "It is the refusal to choose between these three accounts of time, which positions Derrida's notion of time and impossible possibility, as neither that of Heidegger nor that of Levinas, not that of Blanchot; neither Dasein, nor Ereignis, nor infinity, as an intimation of the divine, nor writing as a death, revealing the impossibility of dying." (p. 131) The problem with such a view is that it reduces Derrida's work to an attempt not so much to neutralise opposites, but to bridge all these contradictory positions. Derrida thus ends up being understood as the philosopher who attempted to bring together through deconstructive moves both literature and philosophy, theology and marxism, Judaism and Negative Theology, etc. The rationale for such neutrality is obviously that deconstruction and its "themes" (undecidability, *différance*, etc) prevent the very possibility of a demarcation between these traditional classifications, leaving us stranded if not in a dead-end, at least in a no-man's land of abstract neutrality.

However, is this accusation or this use of the term "neutral" by Hodge and by his detractors justified? Should this term not be prone again to re-invention? If neutrality is the end-point of deconstruction and specifically of Derrida's work, then it cannot mean the fact of not belonging to any side in a war, dispute, or controversy. It must mean something else. Neutrality must be about overturning the cycle of opposites; it must actively pursue an exteriority that would be transcendent but without relation; it must be able to invent that which puts economy in motion. In other words, it must remain a gift, i.e. something which cannot be confused with presence or its phenomenon. Only when neutrality will stop being negative, that it will be able to make sense of time. And in this way,

neutrality will allow us to understand Derrida's contradictions, disaffections, and escapist gestures, not as a refusal to take sides or as a desperate attempt to bridge the unbridgeable, but as the gift of invention, the pure act of giving unconditionally. So if Derrida does not try to make or evade connections between negative theology and political theory, between messianism and Marxism, between time and history, then is it really fair to say that he remains "neutral" (p. 131) like Switzerland or that he is only a "mediating instance" (p. 171) like Kofi Anan between the philosophers he reads?

These three modest and undeveloped arguments/questions are not destined to undermine Hodge's extraordinarily complex and vast work on Derrida. On the contrary, they should be seen as an attempt to make sense of Hodge's gift and thinking, an attempt to hear her own voice behind those of Husserl and Derrida.

the voices of these male heroes of philosophy. Maybe one day, we'll be privileged to be given a *Hodge On Time*. That day, time will no longer be curved and the position will be far from neutral; time will have a colour and a scent never before imagined and, most importantly of all, it will be *our* time.