

Book Review

Benoît Peeters, *Derrida: A Biography*, trans. Andrew Brown
(Cambridge: Polity, 2013)

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It is a perennial question whether philosophers should follow in the manner of Heidegger and regard the biographies of their peers and influences as superfluous storytelling or, along with Montaigne and Rousseau, regard one's life itself as the centerpiece and playground of thought. Of what interest is the life of the philosopher to anyone interested in philosophy? Why concern oneself with familial relations and daily routines when the conceptual core of the philosopher's thought is what we are really after?

Yet, those who concern themselves with philosophy, both as hearers and doers of the discipline, know better. How often does one change one's mind not on the basis of argument alone, but because of one's friends? How many philosophical trajectories have been significantly altered by a simple book recommendation mentioned at a chance meeting of like-minded thinkers? How often does the death of a friend transform the meaning of Socrates' charge that doing philosophy is learning how to die?

Benoît Peeters' excellent biography of Jacques Derrida begins by entertaining these questions by orienting them around the question of biography itself. This interest in beginning with the question of biography itself appears to stem from a desire play with a question Derrida, himself, frequently raised. What are the possibilities for using biography in philosophical discourse? How much of our lives are found in our own thought? Derrida himself raised this question by calling philosophers and thinkers alike to rethink the relation between the written corpus of books, lectures, and essays produced by the philosopher and their own *corps* or body? In other words, what is the relation between the body of the philosopher and their body of work?

In order to get a sense of what the philosopher thinks, of their thought itself, the commitments they held must be put into the picture. We must get a sense of the world they inhabited, what motivated their thought. We must get a sense of the space of Heidegger's hut, Thoreau's cabin, and Derrida's Paris. But more than this, we must get a sense of what they brought from their lives to their work. To emphasize the importance of the contamination of work with life and life with work, Peeters employs a quote by Derrida

from the second documentary on his own life: “Why have [philosophers] effaced their private lives from their work?” (2).

In opposition to such effacement of the private life from public thought, Derrida left traces of his life in nearly all of his works. As one sees in Peeters’ biography, as Derrida grew older, he found even more of his life bleeding onto the pages of such works as *The Post Card* and *Memoirs of the Blind*, not to mention the outrightly autobiographical *Circumfession*. However, these snippets of personal testimony do not amount to a picture of an entire life. What Derrida has left us is not a completed tale of his life, nor has he revealed the autobiographical thread running through all of his work. Instead, what we have is a fragmentary autobiography; sudden burst of the personal contaminating the purity of philosophical discourse.

Peeters’ biography captures this cross-contamination with exhaustive detail without sacrificing the readability of his tale. This delicate balance between the meticulous and the narratively interesting stems from the author’s goal for the volume. Peeters is insistent that he is not providing an introduction to the thought of Jacques Derrida nor is this what we might call an intellectual biography (3). Instead, Peeters claims to be presenting the biography of a philosophy as much as the story of an individual life. As he says, “I will mainly focus on readings and influences, the genesis of the principal works, their turbulent reception, the struggles in which Derrida was engaged, and the institutions he founded” (3). In other words, this is not the deconstruction of Jacques Derrida; it is a fairly straightforward and chronological account of Derrida’s life and the reception of his philosophy as an integral part of that life.

The biographer also claims that he has refused to exclude anything from the biography. Such a claim is itself, impossible. We know not what Derrida’s favorite pair of shoes were, what his favorite meal was, what word he couldn’t stand hearing people use incorrectly. It is not that this information is vital, it is that such information is excluded in favor of more interesting events. The banal elements of Derrida’s life are not attended to as much as the adventure of his life as a citizen of the world is recounted. This stands in contrast to Derrida himself, who saved everything, even little notes on his door placed by Pierre Bourdieu and Etienne Balibar from their shared time as students in France. Such is the tension between meticulousness and narrative movement.

While examining the life of a famous philosopher might be reason enough to pick up the biography, it is the glimpse one gets of academic life in France during the country’s ascent to the center of the philosophical world that is of particular note. One finds that the life of Derrida is rife with encounters with many if not all of the major philosophical minds of France in the second half of the twentieth century. Yet, Derrida’s perspective on academic France is not one of an insider. Rather, Derrida perpetually felt like

an outsider to France's intellectual culture thus prompting him to seek acceptance elsewhere, particularly in America.

Peeters' biography begins with the earliest years of Derrida in El Biar, Algeria. Born into a middle-class family of assimilated Jews, the young Derrida is portrayed as a preternaturally good student who was also quite sensitive to the personal slights and anti-Semitism that rose in the early years of the Second World War. In the face of such opposition, young Jackie discovers literature through the novel *The Fruits of the Earth* by Andre Gide, a book that, like literature itself, would be a constant companion for Derrida (18). Quickly, Derrida's love of reading—his favorite activity besides soccer—led him to the discovery of thinkers such as Rousseau and Nietzsche, thinkers that would lead him away from the Judaism of his childhood and more towards his vocation as a philosopher (28). At the end of the 1940's, Derrida travels to Paris in his first trip away from Algeria and his family, to attend the Lycée Louis-le-Grand. The experience, while formative, also highlights how life for lycée students could be cruel and depressing. For the first time, Derrida experienced academic setbacks. One assessment of his philosophical work at the time is particularly prescient, as it could be said of Derrida at pretty much any stage of his philosophical career:

There is undeniably a philosopher lurking somewhere in this writer. If I think of the whole historical part, I have to say that there is much too much philosophy in these pages. Because potted summaries of philosophy don't add up to much. So the whole beginning of your essay left me uncertain and even unhappy. But when you start to analyse things, despite your over-'specialized', hermetic language, your text becomes really interesting and have several good qualities. (44)

Such an assessment is shown to be true as Peeters recounts Derrida's transition from student at the lycee louis-le-grand to his eventual acceptance into the Ecole Normale Superiere (ENS). ENS becomes one in a significantly lengthy list of academic institutions that made Derrida feel alienated and forced to compromise his style of reading texts for the sake of appeasing the academic establishment. While this is a constant source of criticism for Derrida even now, Peeters does not make any arguments for or against the difficulty of Derrida's texts. The difficulty of his written works and Derrida's own thoughts about their apparent difficulty are all that we are shown.

Yet, in spite of the difficulty he faced with academic life as a student, eventually Derrida begins to see some success. After stints in Algeria, the United States, and Le Mans, Derrida is invited by his former mentor, Louis Althusser, to become his assistant and an instructor at ENS (144). It is at ENS as an instructor and through his burgeoning publishing career that Derrida

goes from a little known student of famous French philosophers to a thinker at the center of French academic life. At the close of the first section of the biography, then, we see young Jackie transformed into Derrida the (seemingly) triumphant (170).

Peeters marks this transition from philosophical unknown to academic heavyweight in the titles of his biography's three sections. The movement from young student to philosophical mover and shaker is seen as the transition from *Jackie* to *Derrida*. Indeed, in this middle section of the book, one sees Derrida met with increasing resistance in France while he begins his long academic love affair with American English Departments. It is in this section that deconstruction goes from an inventive way of reading texts to a character in its own right. It is not only Derrida himself who meets increased opposition—first for his reticence to engage in political activity and later for his lack of compliance with the popular philosophical trends of the day—but also deconstruction itself that is met with suspicion (230). Derrida is portrayed as being hesitant to abandon his methods and style while also being hesitant to embrace the more public persona of his philosophical contemporaries like Foucault. If the first section of the book is focused on Derrida's rise to prominence, this middle section details his increased distancing from French academic squabbles and shift towards more international work.

Appropriately, then, Peeters chooses to end the section with a detailed account of Derrida's incarceration in Prague and the subsequent outrage by Francois Mitterrand over the philosopher's ordeal (232). It is perhaps at this point, more than any other, that the importance of Derrida's biography can wade into debates concerning his philosophic work. While Peeters shows that Derrida's interests always included ethical and political concerns—from his feelings about Algerian anti-Semitism and his concerns over the Algerian war to his engagement with the work of Emmanuel Levinas, to his encounters with French Marxists, all shown via personal letters and non-professional remarks made between friends—it is the days spent in prison that appear to shift Derrida's work away from primarily metaphysical and linguistic problems and into the realm of questions concerning the law, the state, and the other (374).

The final section of the book, *Jacques Derrida*, acts as both a reconciliation of the ascent of young Jackie from El Biar and Derrida the father of Deconstruction, and as a prolonged denouement of the Derrida's life. Beginning with the twin controversies concerning Martin Heidegger and Paul de Man (379), Peeters shows a Derrida that is increasingly international—his travels to America having become an institution at this point—but also increasingly sensitive. The twilight of Derrida's life shows us a man who was so frustrated by years of contention than any who did not agree with his positions come to be seen as enemies or, at the very least, shown no regard or returned communication. Thus we see his once

incredibly strong bonds to Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe and Sarah Kofman strained (although his bond with Jean-Luc Nancy apparently never diminished) as the book approaches the turn of the century. Beyond the increased travel, Peeters reveals Derrida to be increasingly concerned with maintaining connections with those whose relations with him were not strained. Towards the end of his life, Derrida is increasingly concerned with his inability to respond to the constant stream of letters and phone calls he received. And yet, as was the case from his childhood until the point of his death, Jacques Derrida kept a record of everything sent his way.

The death of Derrida has produced no shortage of scholarly reassessments and reflections on the importance of his work for philosophy and literature. Essays and volumes by John Sallis, J. Hillis Miller, and Michael Naas—all serious scholars of and friends with Derrida—attest to this posthumous refection. Yet, while all of these volumes contain personal accounts and anecdotes, they all focus primarily on the thought of Derrida and on what deconstruction's legacy in the history of philosophy would entail. As such, Peeters' biography provides an excellent companion to the plethora of scholarship that appears, almost yearly, incorporating and critiquing the philosophy of Jacques Derrida. Moreover, the biography raises several key issues that will interest philosophers and scholars of twentieth century French thought. I'll attempt to highlight two of them.

The first issue raised is one that continues to plague academic philosophers, namely, that of precarious employment. At almost every turn, Derrida is shown to be either an instructor or administrator or visiting professor but never attaining the kind of stable employment that his mentors and contemporaries secured. It was the kindness of Althusser, his American popularity, and his prolific publications that allowed Derrida to support himself and his family. On numerous occasions, Derrida's opportunities to secure gainful academic employment were dashed for political reasons. Such was his awareness of his own standing within traditional French academia that he could say, without irony, to his friend Rene Major: "They'll make you pay very dearly for the interest you're showing in my work, I can promise you that" (286). Current advice on dissertation topics for philosophy Ph. D. Students tends not to deviate from Derrida's own self-assessment.

The second issue raised by this biography is that of method. Not only are we given access to Derrida's personal life and the development of deconstruction, but Peeters also gives us a glimpse into the working and teaching methods Derrida employed throughout his life. Peeters quotes Derrida on his working method at length:

I sometimes write lying down, taking notes when I wake up, after a dream. [...] When I write sitting down, I'm managing thoughts, ideas, movements of thought that

always come to me when I'm standing up, doing something else, walking, driving, running. When I used to go running (I've stopped now), that was then the most organizing things, ideas, would come to me. I've sometimes gone running with a piece of paper in my pocket to make notes. Then, when I sat down in front of my table [...], I was managing, making use of furtive, cursive things, sometimes flashes of inspiration, that always came to me when I was running. I very quickly became aware of this: it was when I was on my feet that good things could come to me. (430)

Moreover, Derrida never claimed to just sit down and write a book. Rather, "Everything that I've done, even the most composite of my books, were 'occasioned' by a question. [...] Why write? I've always have the feeling...that I have nothing to say" (431). In spite of this question "why write?", Derrida managed to produce an intimidating amount of essays, lectures, and texts even in his twilight years. Yet, Peeters is quick to note that Derrida never lost sight of his primary role as a teacher. He quotes David Carroll concerning Derrida's lectures at UC Irvine: "There was always a big audience; even his supposedly closed seminar was packed. But this didn't prevent Derrida from spending a great deal of time seeing students individually and discussing their papers, their theses, and their personal plans with them" (455). Peeters allows us to see Derrida as a thinker fully engaged with both research and teaching, without finding the two of them to be at odds. Indeed, what becomes clear in the book is that Derrida's writing and teaching methods stand as an argument for philosophy as a lively and thoroughly social enterprise rather than the droll and isolated discipline it is sometimes portrayed to be.

In conclusion, Benoît Peeters' biography of Jacques Derrida is an excellent glimpse into the fascinating life of one of the most internationally active and recognized philosophers of the twentieth century. It is a near-exhaustive biography that offers philosophers, scholars, and Francophiles alike a chance to see behind the scenes of French academic life and examine it from the perspective of one who was both inside and outside the academy; both a profound lover of the French language and culture and a true cosmopolitan.

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