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Taking Derrida Seriously

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RODOLPHE GASCHE, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986, vii + 384 pp.

The title of Rodolphe Gasche's book, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection*, is thought provoking indeed. The reader is faced with a challenge and a promise, since the title suggests a confrontation between Derrida and Hegel. In fact, we are invited to think about the underside of reflection, about that dull side of the mirror, its tain, which gives rise to its specular play. Hegel used the phrase, "philosophy of reflection," as a name for the philosophical tradition extending from Descartes to Fichte. The main theme of the tradition is that the mind gains knowledge of itself through reflecting on the way in which it comes to know a world of objects. Hegel believed that the philosophy of reflection is led, necessarily, into inner contradictions which can be overcome only within his own speculative philosophy: "absolute reflection".

In the Introduction Gasche states the purpose of the book and gives an outline of its main themes. His main purpose is to interpret Derrida's writings in the perspective of philosophy. The interpretation is primarily philosophical in intent, he says, first because "it focuses on Derrida's relation to the philosophical tradition" (p. 2), and, secondly, because he wants to show that "the specific displacements of traditional philosophical issues by deconstruction amount not to an abandonment of philosophical thought as such, but rather to an attempt at positively recasting philosophy's necessity and possibility in view of its inevitable inconsistencies" (p. 2).

By insisting on the essentially philosophical character of the Derridian enterprise Gasche aims at two targets. On the one hand he wants to silence those philosophical critics for whom deconstruction is at best a playful exercise in frivolity, and at worst a dangerous lapse of rationality. On the other hand he wants to discredit "deconstructionist criticism" fashionable with American literary critics: an attempt to apply Derrida's method without taking into account its philosophical presuppositions.

Gasche recognizes that he is not the first to situate Derrida's thought in the history of ideas, but he thinks that he is the first to "discuss Derrida's philosophy in terms of the criticism to which the philosophical concept of reflection and reflexivity has been subjected" (p. 5). He considers this task

to be especially important since too many literary critics, according to him, confuse deconstruction and reflection.

The Tain in the Mirror consists of three parts. The first, "Towards the Limit of Reflection", begins by expounding the Hegelian critique of reflections and concludes by a discussion of what Gasche calls the "post-Hegelian critique of reflexivity". This critique of the Hegelian concept of negativity anticipates, in Gasche's opinion, the Derridian critique of the Hegelian dialectic. The second part of the book, entitled "On Deconstruction", is intended to be an explanation of deconstructionist methodology. Here the specifically Derridian concept of "deconstruction" is compared to Husserl's conception of "Abbau" and Heidegger's conception of "Destruktion". Gasche argues that the "infrastructural chain": Arche-Trace/Differance/Supplementarity/Itirability/Re-mark, constitutes a "system beyond being", a founding chain of concepts rendering philosophy's concepts possible and at the same time preventing them from ever becoming fully autonomous, fully transparent. The third, and last, part of the book poses a question: "Literature or Philosophy"? Having explained the philosophical essence of deconstruction one would expect Gasche to devote the last part of the book to an examination of the relation between philosophy and literature. However, after a relatively short discussion of that specific issue Gasche turns, in a much longer chapter, to a discussion of what he calls the "inscription of universality". What Gasche seems to have in mind here is the problem of universality, or generality, of philosophical and critical discourse, but surprisingly he nowhere spells out in clear terms the issues at stake. His intentions have to be guessed from laconic remarks such as this: "Derrida's philosophy, as I shall show, is plural, yet not pluralistic in the liberal sense —* that is, as Hegel knew, secretly monological" (pp. 7-8).

The book as a whole gives the impression of a patch-work and does not have enough focus to yield a coherent and sustained argument. For example, Part I could stand on its own. Its claim that Flach's critique of Hegel anticipates Derrida's critique is not essential to the argument of the book as a whole. When Flach is mentioned again in part II (pp. 182-183) it is at best a digression and at worst a distraction from the argument at hand. Also, the very brief discussion of Husserl and Heidegger at the beginning of Part II does not seem to lead to, or point to, anywhere else in the book. Still, reproaching a book for lack of focus is a delicate matter, especially one which is as ambitious and sure of itself as the *Tain* seems to be — judged by what it says in its Introduction.

Therefore, in what follows I shall try to indicate, by going through it in more detail, how this very ambitious project succeeds only in raising some very important questions but fails, in the final analysis, to give an adequate response to them.

In Part I Gasche takes his readers through the Hegelian critique of the philosophy of reflection, warning that all criticisms or new accounts of reflection must measure up to the speculative solution given by Hegel (pp. 75, 87).

He shows quite clearly and convincingly that the philosophy of reflection, the position which was first articulated systematically by Descartes, falls prey to its own contradictions. Reflection in all its forms implies a process of turning back upon itself: a knowing subject, a consciousness (a mirror) by reflecting (being conscious of) of the reflection (mirroring) of an object is able to see itself, gain self-knowledge (self-consciousness). Kant's notion of transcendental reflection, the "transcendental unity of apperception" as he calls it, contains the germs of Hegel's speculative reflection in that it moves away from the individual, empirical subject of reflection. However, Hegel notes that the contradictions generated by Kant's own transcendental dualism can only be overcome if the subject of reflection is conceived as an "absolute self-reflecting subject-object". The Absolute, that which depends on nothing outside itself for its being, must contain as "elements" constituting its unity all relations and all terms of all relations, *including* the "contradictory" ones such as identity and non-identity, motion and rest, and even being and nothing. It is, in other words, the ceaseless becoming one of all that is different.

Following his exposition of the Hegelian theory of reflection Gasche provides what he thinks is a theoretically adequate, if not historically complete, account of the links between Hegel and Derrida. By far the most significant representative of the post-Hegelian German critique of reflection is the neo-Kantian philosopher Werner Flach. The chapter devoted to Flach is entitled, very significantly, "The Interfacings of Heterology". "Heterology", and "interfacings" (*symploke*) are the two concepts which, according to Gasche come closest, within traditional philosophy, which presumably excludes Nietzsche,¹ Dilthey, Husserl, and Heidegger, to Derrida's own thinking.

Flach's concept of heterology allows for a radically un-Hegelian way of thinking negation and otherness; and it is interesting in that it offers a way of confronting Hegel's philosophy of identity by arguments that resist being absorbed into the orbit of absolute reflection. Flach's insight is that the Hegelian dialectic works because its concept of negation is homogenous, continuous with what it negates. Consequently, absolute identity is built into the speculative synthesis through negation. A corollary of this is that the Hegelian Other, being simply a dialectical negation of the One, is never an exclusive other. On the level of principles this has the effect of completely undermining the Hegelian notion of "ground". For, as Flach insists, a ground cannot be homogeneous with what it grounds. In other words, true grounding must be heterogeneous, exclusively other, to what it grounds.

But, Gasche does not address the question how a neo-Kantian critique of Hegel can, as he himself says, measure up to Hegel's speculative solution. More specifically, he does not raise the question how Flach's solution avoids the kind of transcendental dualism Hegel wished to overcome. Therefore, he leaves Flach's definition of "ground" open to the possible Hegelian objection that it is just another abstract definition. Still, Gasche is right that Derrida's conception of difference has, in contrast to Hegel's, this feature of heterogene-

ity. He is right, in other words, to insist that Derrida too wants a concept of difference which is not essentially structured by identity. Thus, Gasche's discussion of Flach may be looked at as reference by posing the question: can Derrida do better against Hegel?

After making a few gestures towards Nietzsche and Dilthey at the end of Part I as the originators of another type of criticism directed against Hegel, he turns, without further comment about Nietzsche and Dilthey to Husserl and Heidegger. Not only is Gasche moving on to these two philosophers much too abruptly, but his discussion of them is far too brief. It, therefore, runs the risk of collapsing into one the different types of relations that exist between Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger and Derrida. He says not one word, for example, about possible connections between Hegel's and Husserl's phenomenology, not one word about the differences between Hegel's, Heidegger's and Derrida's treatment of 'difference'. Also, his discussion of the relation between the Husserlian concept of *Abbau* (dismantling), the Heideggerian concept of *Destruktion*, and the Derridian concept of "deconstruction" is not entirely satisfactory. "The method of dismantling", he says, "is non-reflective because it allows for a retrogression to something that cannot *in principle* be given as such" (p. 111). For this reason it anticipates deconstruction, which also is a "non-reflective turning back" (*ibid*). Leaving aside the question whether Gasche is reading too much of his own views back into Husserl and Derrida in claiming that dismantling and deconstruction are essentially ways "to reach back to origins that must remain essentially concealed if they are to function as the original historical premises of history" (*ibid*), and leaving aside the question Hegel might ask about an origin that must remain essentially concealed, one has the right to feel a bit let down when one reads some pages later that, while "deconstruction shares with *Abbau* and *Destruktion* the goal of attaining the 'ultimate foundation' of concepts [. . .] these foundations, as we shall see, are no longer essences, however radical" (p. 120). The problem is not that Derrida's so called "foundations" are considered by Gasche not to be "essences"; it is rather that Gasche gives no justification for calling Husserl's "concealed origins" or Heidegger's "Being" "essences". We feel that a point is made too quickly rendering Husserl's and Heidegger's position more simplistic than they are. His sound point is that Derrida has to be read with and against the background of over a hundred and fifty years of European philosophy. In my opinion he could have made a much better case if he had restricted his argument to Hegel, or to Heidegger, or even just to Husserl.

The longest and most important chapter in *the Tain of the Mirror* is entitled "System Beyond Being". This is where Gasche gives his fullest explanation of deconstruction:

Deconstruction is an attempt to account for these various and essentially heterogeneous aporias discursive inequalities with what I have called infrastructures. These minimal structures are both the grounds of possibilities of the canonical philosophical gestures and themes and their un-grounds, that is, that which makes them im-

possible, (pp. 174-175)

He wants to argue that Derrida's thought cannot be determined simply as "anti-systematic". "Derrida's exploration of the infrastructures", he says, "both continues the systematic telos of philosophy and attempts something entirely different [. . .]" (p. 178). The argument consists of a detailed, perhaps even excessively so, account of such Derridian infrastructural concepts as "Ache-Trace", "Difference", "Supplementary", "Itirability" and "Re-mark". By the end of the chapter the reader is so lost in detail, and in quotations after quotations from Derrida, that he loses sight of the alleged "stratified systemicity" of these infrastructures. And what he is told at the end of seventy or more very dense, barely readable, pages is by then not very big news: "The system of these infrastructures as one of syntactically re-marked syncategoramata is a system that escapes all phenomenologization as such; it constantly disappears and withdraws from all possible presentation" (p. 250).

In fairness to Gasche it must be said that he does provide insights into Derrida's "concepts", and into their (heterological) interlacings. And, more significantly he does demonstrate that while these concepts do not define a realm of ontologically fundamental beings, they do have a kind of priority in that they form a kind of "system" beyond being which regulates both the process of founding and the inevitable process of un-founding beings. But, he also wants to construe this "system" as the essential non-ontological counterpoint to traditional ontology. (I shall come back to this point later.)

If Part II of the book can be seen as a discussion of Derrida's "concepts" then the last section of Part III, "Metaphor" can be seen as Derrida's "concept of concepts". And, because of its intimate connection with the theme of Part II this section should have been included in it.

Gasche's discussion of metaphoricity, or "quasi-metaphoricity" as he calls it, also sheds an important light on Derrida's relation to the philosophical tradition. Already in his earlier discussion of heterology Gasche notes that: "Aristotle set the standards of thought when he stated that one does not think at all if one does not think *one* thing — the thing in its essential unity" (p. 100). And, he notes there that in this sense of thinking Derrida's heterology does not think at all. One might say that it is the entrenchment of the Aristotelian bias about thinking that presents the greatest obstacles to a sympathetic reception of not only Derrida's writings but also of Hegel's. However, Derrida's writings have the added handicap against the Aristotelian bias because as much as Hegel opposes the rigid application of Aristotelian Laws of Thought *by the understanding*, by finite thinking, he does *not* oppose them on the level of "infinite thinking", and it should be emphasized that this "infinite thinking" is absolute reflection, or as Gasche puts it, a form of absolute "auto-affection". Consequently, the most decisive confrontation with Hegel occurs when Gasche confronts the Derridian notion of "originary-doubling" with the Hegelian notion of "auto-affection". Auto-affection according to Der-

rida is the condition whereby subjectivity — the for-itself — "gains in power and in its mastery of the other to the extent that its power of repetition idealizes itself (Derrida 1976:165-166). What Hegel forgets is that idealization is recurrence; he forgets that being "for-itself" is possible only as a folding (doubling) of (determinate) being over itself, just as the latter is possible only as a ceaseless folding (doubling) over of being and nothing — of one and an other in determinate being. Such Derridian concepts as the "trace" and "différance" etc., are meant to account for this radical alterity constitutive of determinate being. As Gasche puts it: "At stake is the structural disjunction of an altering difference without which no auto-affection would be possible, but owing to which it is also, rigorously speaking, impossible" (p. 234). What this entails is that a "being one thing" is rigorously impossible apart from the absences punctuating it, defer-differing it from its own presence. Also, what this entails is that in deconstructionist terms we cannot speak of the conceptual fullness of thinking.

Nevertheless, Gasche warns against hastily jumping to the conclusion that since there is no conceptuality there can only be metaphoricity. This confusion results from forgetting that metaphor is always a metaphor of philosophy and that, therefore, it always already presupposes philosophy's conceptuality. Hence, the generalization of metaphor advocated by deconstruction must keep the continuity between the metaphor and the concept. Gasche uses the term "quasi-metaphoricity" to describe this phenomenon. And Gasche notes (p. 313), that Derrida points to a radical displacement of Being by showing, that Being can never escape the system of differences. Thus, if there is any difference between traditional and Derridian commentary, be it of philosophical or of literary texts, it is that the latter does not get stuck within some alleged fully constituted theme, nor does it, as a phenomenological criticism would do, hang its hopes on a possible resolution in a supposed future horizon, but rather it explores through a given "theme" those underlying structures which found and at the same time un-found all thematicity.

Gasche's most detailed discussion of the relation between literature and philosophy is provided in the second to last chapter. In this chapter entitled "Literature in Parentheses" he claims that literary criticism, at least as it has been practiced up to now, is nothing more than a kind of philosophy of literature. As he sees it, the inauguration of the concept of literature by Aristotle's *Poetics* coincides with its disappearance (p. 256). Defining literature as *mimesis* relegates it to a sort of a metaphoric afterglow of philosophy. "With the exception of certain rare examples", he says, echoing Derrida, "literary writing has subjugated itself to the constraints of the concept and to the ethos of philosophy" (*ibid*). In fact, all attempts to define "literariness" serve only to reproduce and reinforce literature's dependence on philosophy by simply repeating the latter's search after essences, forms, and the one-in-the-many. Literature will become a radical challenge to philosophy and to "thematic" literature only when it breaks with "the transcendental authority and domi-

nant category of the *episteme*: being" (Derrida 1976:92).² It is precisely "by suspending its *being* a literature that literature becomes capable of challenging philosophy's dominant categorization" (p. 258). But, how, one might ask, is literature supposed to "suspend its being"? The answer is that it should not simply abandon the quest for the necessary and sufficient condition for its specificity, but also that it should turn away from any attempt to constitute itself in terms of fully developed identities.

At this point one might wonder if there is not a dangerous sliding together here of literature, literary criticism and philosophy. Could not, in other words, literature go about its business regardless of the image critics and philosophers have of it? Is there not something like the "literary work" which makes its way, as does the "dream work", behind the back of philosophico-critical consciousness? On one level Gasche's answer must clearly be, yes. How otherwise would Nietzsche, Mallarmé and other "nomads" of traditional writing be possible? However, a moment's reflection reveals that as long as the status of literature is a main concern, philosophy and criticism will always have the last word. And to make matters worse, the preoccupation with being does not simply come to the literary work from the outside. The same metaphysics that governs the commentary governs the works commented on. This is most evident, argues Gasche, in case of the approach called 'thematic criticism' (p. 262). This type of criticism is one which is oriented toward content and meaning. Even structural semantics with its insistence on polysemy does not significantly differ from the (mono)-thematic approach, for it too reassembles the multiplicity of meanings into a final horizon of meaning, "into a unitary totality of the meaning of a text and thus secures the totality of the text as well" (p. 263).

The Derridian approach promises a radical revolution in literature and in literary criticism. However, Gasche would add, this approach is open only to those who are willing to assume the radical revolution in philosophy outlined in the rest of the book.

Gasche has an impressive mastery of Derrida's texts. Still, the argument of his book lacks focus. Perhaps it would have been better for him to rely less on quotations from Derrida to make his points or even to take more of a distance from Derrida's style of expressing himself. The two main claims of the book to originality are, first, its attempt to confront deconstructionism with Hegel's speculative philosophy, and secondly, its attempt to demonstrate the essentially philosophical nature of deconstruction.

Now, readers of Derrida need not be convinced of the general point that deconstruction is a significant intervention in philosophy and that as such it cannot avoid a decisive confrontation with Hegel. In fact, Derrida himself has formulated the difficulties involved in this task with ruthless clarity:

What is at stake here is enormous. I emphasize the Hegelian *Aufhebung*, such as it is interpreted by a certain Hegelian discourse, for it goes without saying that the double meaning of *Aufhebung* could be written otherwise. Whence its proximity to all the

operations conducted *against* Hegel's dialectical speculation. (Derrida 1981:41)

And, he points out that the task of explaining the relationship between Hegel and deconstruction is "a difficult labour, which for the most part remains before us, and which in a certain way interminable, at least if one wishes to execute it rigorously and minutely" (*ibid*, p. 43-44). So the question to ask is what Gasche has contributed to this, "in a certain way," interminable labour? His metaphor of the "tain" is very suggestive; however his book has difficulty going beyond an elaboration of this metaphor. His reference to Flach's idea that a ground must be heteronomous with what it grounds is promising. Yet, one cannot help feeling that what he does best is to reformulate Derrida's insights in a number of different ways and that he does not engage Derrida's philosophical "opponents" in rigorous and minute ways.

What is perhaps even more serious is that in his attempt to defend de-construction against the charge of not being serious enough, philosophically, Gasche tends to direct attention away from a very important aspect of Derrida's writings: their affinity with Nietzsche's approach to philosophy. He mentions Nietzsche on several occasions but does not pay nearly enough attention to him as a critic of subjectivity and of the dialectic. As a result Nietzsche cannot figure for him as an essential precursor of deconstruction, a philosopher-poet who was one of the first to challenge the traditional conception of the relation between philosophy and literature. Also, Nietzsche was much more sensitive to the need to situate the critique of metaphysics within metaphysics itself than Gasche gives him credit for. It would still be difficult to give a better summary of the method of deconstruction than the one given by Nietzsche in the following passage:

In regard to philosophical metaphysics, I see more and more who are making for the negative goal (that all positive metaphysics is an error), but still few who are taking a few steps back; for one may well want to look out over the topmost rung of the ladder, but one ought not to want to stand on it. The most enlightened get only as far as liberating themselves from metaphysics and looking back on it from above: whereas here too, as in the hippodrome, at the end of the track it is necessary to turn the corner. (Nietzsche 1986:23)

Had Gasche taken Derrida's Nietzschean sources more seriously he could not have passed over the doctrine of the "will to power" in silence. A careful reading of this doctrine, as the one given, for example, by Deleuze, makes it clear that it was an attempt to rethink the Kantian problem of "transcendental synthesis" in non-dialectical non-subjectivist terms. "Will to power", "eternal return" and "interpretation" must be seen as Nietzsche's "transcendentals", as his "system beyond being". If this is true then it follows that other "infrastructural chains" besides Gasche's are possible. Naturally, this does not undermine Gasche's version of the "infrastructural chain". It does, however, take some of the sting out of his attacks against those who refuse to draw a sharp distinction between philosophy and the free play of concepts.

In other words, it leaves Gasche with a dilemma: either he must accept the inherent instability of deconstruction or he is committed to a form of essentialism on the meta-theoretical level. And such meta-theoretical essentialism is unavoidable unless we are prepared to assume that there is no privileged position within philosophy from which to start a transcendental deduction of the concepts of deconstruction. We must be prepared to grant that even Derrida's concepts might be replaced by a different set of concepts such as, for example, "will to power", "eternal return" and "interpretations". And if this is not granted it is difficult to know how one can get out of the clutches of Hegelianism.

NOTES

- 1 "I do not mean this to be a straightforward historical presentation of the antecedents of the approach now to be discussed, namely, that of Jacques Derrida. Those landmarks can be found in the philosophies of Nietzsche, Dilthey, the later Husserl and the early Heidegger — in short, in a type of philosophy that cannot comfortably be placed within the usual philosophical classifications. These are philosophies that unwind out of the philosophy of subjectivity" (p. 80). This is the closest Gasche comes to a justification for paying less attention to these philosophers' criticism of Hegel than to Flach's. He does not explain what he means by philosophies which "unwind out of the philosophy of subjectivity". In his comments on Nietzsche in the pages that follow this passage he emphasizes Nietzsche's concept of "life". But, as Houlgate (1986) has argued, a Nietzschean critique of Hegel which starts from the concept of "life" is especially vulnerable to a Hegelian counter-attack.
- 2 Gasche cites this phrase on p. 258. A comparison of the contexts in which this phrase occurs shows that Derrida is more willing to assume Nietzsche as a precursor to deconstruction than is Gasche. "Rather, if the first break in the most entrenched Western tradition of both literature and philosophy stem from literary or poetic writing's deconstruction of "the transcendental authority and dominant category of the *episteme*: being" (OG, p. 92), then this vacillation could have been achieved only through its "generalized putting-in-quotation marks of literature, of the so-called literary text" (D, p. 291)." (Gasche p. 258) "It was normal that the breakthrough was more secure and more penetrating on the side of literature and poetic writing: normal also that it, like Nietzsche, at first destroyed and caused to vacillate the transcendental authority and dominant category of the *episteme*: being." (Derrida 1976:92)

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Rodolphe Gasche, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986. 348 pp. Irene E. Harvey, *Derrida and the Economy of Differance*. Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986. xv & 285 pp. John Llewelyn, *Derrida on the Threshold of Sense*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986. xiii & 137 pp. View via Publisher. Save to Library. Rodolphe Deconstruction is no game of mirrors, revealing the text as a play of surface against surface. Its more radical philosophical effort is to get behind the mirror and question the very nature of reflection. The Tain of the Mirror (tain names the tinfoil, or lusterless back of the mirror) explores that gritty surface without which no reflection would be possible. Rodolphe Gasche does what no one has done before in many discussions of Derrida, namely to tie his work in an authoritative way to its origins in the history of the criticism of reflexivity. ...more. Get A Copy. Amazon.