

**MARTIN MCQUILLAN (2009) *DECONSTRUCTION  
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In a number of edited volumes—including *Deconstruction: A Reader* (2000), an issue of *Parallax* on 'The New International' (2001), *The Politics of Deconstruction: Jacques Derrida and the Other of Philosophy* (2007), and *Deconstruction Reading Politics* (2008)—Martin McQuillan has played an important role in bringing together some of the most challenging, critical responses to the writings of Jacques Derrida while making a decisive contribution toward rearticulating the relation—the complex and often obscure entanglements—between deconstruction and politics. *Deconstruction After 9/11* might be read as McQuillan's own, singular trajectory through this literature, a lucid unraveling of the strands that bind deconstruction to rethinking what constitutes the political today, and an equally decisive attempt to hold open the legacies of Derrida's writings in the face of their closure or 'monumentalization' (in Paul de Man's terms).

Structured in such a way that the chapters open towards different scenes, intellectual itineraries, and encounters—not only with other written texts but films, events, lectures, conferences, and dialogues, and often marked by their geographical context, political contingency, and occasion (Sofia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Cyprus, Hungary, Iraq, Palestine . . .)—*Deconstruction After 9/11* also offers a compelling sense of what it means to inhabit the world of deconstruction, at least insofar as to inhabit the world of deconstruction is simultaneously to inhabit a world *in* deconstruction, and at least insofar as deconstruction ever allows us to 'inhabit' a world from which we are not merely estranged but a world in which the stranger becomes one of the motifs for our exposure to alterity as such. As McQuillan suggests, if the nineteenth century was the European century, and the twentieth

century was the American century, 'perhaps, the twenty-first century will be the century of the other' (xiii).

There is something quite intimate about McQuillan's text, this 'volume of autobiography' (xi) characterized by readings that stem from an acknowledged 'urge' to write or a recognition that the writing of a text is always already a response to a demand or imperative. Or again, 'autobiographically speaking,' McQuillan suggests that the writing of a book that frames itself in terms of deconstruction after 9/11 'will have been a way of exceeding the politics of indignation by insisting on an unconditional critical response at a moment when it seemed most needed, even as critical thought will have been the one thing sovereign power would like most to ignore' (xii). It is in this sense that the reference to autobiography is less a form of self-affirmation than the opening of a series of readings that seek to 'recount the story of time spent in textual activism' (xii), a term that McQuillan associates as much with the writings of Paul de Man (about whom he has also written a volume) as Derrida. In framing the chapters by insisting that such encounters unfold around a passionate commitment to the (im)possibilities of 'textual activism' in the world today, the phrase opens toward rethinking the rapport that remains at stake throughout the book between the world, text, and philosopher-critic, a phrasing that should also recall the work of Edward Said, to which McQuillan devotes the last chapter but whose presence (as the 'last Jewish intellectual' as Said once described himself) hovers throughout. Given the range of recent as well as contemporary geopolitical conjunctures that frame each of the chapters, rethinking the rapport between world, text and philosopher-critic also suggests a response to Said's early suspicions of 'traveling theory,' which Said once characterized as 'the university's practice to admit the subversions of cultural theory in order to some degree to neutralize them by fixing them in the status of academic subspecialities,' further suggesting how so much of cultural theory requires little more than 'the same effort and commitment required in choosing items from a menu' (quoted 146). Indeed, the 'ruthless challenge' (167) of Said's writings becomes a crucial touchstone to the book as a whole, as if part of McQuillan's own ambition in the book is to parse out again what Said is finally unable to acknowledge in his ambivalence toward deconstruction, even as it is a rereading of Said's very writings that make an uncircumventable difficulty concerning deconstruction more fully discernible today.

The difficulty for Said . . . is his inability to find a means of articulating the difference between ‘deconstructionism’ as an institutional conjuncture of professional persons associated with the name of Derrida and the interpretative figure which changes and overturns meaning in texts and so the real world. In other words, he fails to find a vocabulary which can adequately and strategically describe deconstruction itself as quasi-transcendental figure, which shuttles between its material institutions and ‘conceptual’ operation, asserting the priority of neither and the subordination of both to a wider movement neither is in a position to understand given that deconstruction is itself this very structure. Said’s appropriative position is unable to control (in a quite involuntary way) the proliferating effects of this textual scene and thus his own argument is constitutively ruined from the beginning by the trope (the ‘involuntary’ nature of deconstruction, a passive activity which is actively passive) that it wished to question in the first place. (152)

If *Deconstruction After 9/11* is written in part in the wake of McQuillan’s reading of Said, each chapter seeks to put into play a close reading that ‘displaces the appropriative categories of “action” and “world” into a nuanced affirmation of the complexity of “acts” of deconstruction (including those which know themselves to be such and those which do not)’ (152). While the means of making such a distinction remain open to elaboration, the larger ambition is to demonstrate that the ‘actively passive’ condition of deconstruction’s ‘passive activity’ holds open the ‘proliferating effects of this textual scene,’ and to do so in a way that the we are now forced to rearticulate not just the rapport that binds the text and philosopher-critic in ‘acts’ of reading but the grammar or logic in which the reading of a text ‘overturns meaning in texts and so the real world’—in short, readings that hold open a world that survives in ways that remain irreducible to all forms of closure, representation, or appropriation.

If Said’s thought plays an important role in framing the argument of *Deconstruction After 9/11*, it is clearly Derrida’s later texts—those dealing with questions of sovereignty, hospitality, justice, religion, tele-technologies, democracy to come, auto-immunity—that form

the conceptual basis of each of the chapters, texts for which McQuillan seeks to offer a 'substantial exegesis' as well as a 'mobilization' of their content (ix) (it is in this sense that 'hospitality' is acknowledged as a 'leitmotif' (179) of the book as a whole). It is in the wake of Derrida's later writings—assuming that the distinction between early and late is relevant to our understanding of Derrida, a distinction that McQuillan himself often problematizes—that the different chapters address a series of political events linked by war, conflict, and violence, so that if a certain history of contemporary global unrest at war 'runs through these essays like a red thread,' then the readings not only 'wish to account for rationally the use of violence as politics' (xii) but to ask about the conditions of 'writing critique in a time of terror' (7). Or rather, McQuillan suggests that chapters do not offer a direct approach to political events as such but rather 'oblique encounters with the event through the textual tradition or cultural milieu, which explore the porous boundaries and conceptual interconnections between textual fields, refusing the negation of the melancholic, unreflective division between material and figural, theory and practice, philosophy and policy' (xii).

Individual chapters attest to the specificity and singularity of those events that constitute 'war' today, including not only the war on terror that has become a mutation of the concept of war itself but also 'the perpetual war of the idiomatic' (8) in which the war on terror comes to be articulated or inscribed. Beyond the necessity of rethinking 9/11 as event in terms its 'metonymic insistence' or 'iterability,' and so displacing the 'after' in 'deconstruction after 9/11' in terms of its temporal sequencing and causal logic, each of the chapters take up a specific text in order to weave it into a reading of a contemporary conflict. Derrida's *Rogues* (2005) is thus reopened in order to examine the gulf that exists between international war, concepts of 'just war,' sovereignty, 'extraordinary rendition,' global economies of violence, and renewed conceptual genealogies of justice and law, notably in relation to conflicts in the Balkans, Kosovo and break up of former Yugoslavia as well as to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (in a chapter that was admittedly written before Hamas came to power), but also in relation to the role of such institutions as the U.N. and NATO. In this sense, in the wake of Kosovo—to take a key reference in the book—the 'end' of the bombing, coupled to a UN resolution to 'end' the conflict, remains suspended in its outcome, for 'NATO's attempt to establish itself as the supreme agent of international law and the advent of an entirely new kind of tele-technological violence' makes visible as a condition

of its operation ‘the immediate presence of the abyss between law and non-law upon which every programmatic juridical procedure depends’ (46). Derrida’s unpacking of the logic of ‘auto-immunity’ in *Rogues* also relates to the various ways in which a ‘system, in quasi-suicidal fashion, works to destroy its own methods of protection, immunizing itself against its own immunity, and so undoes its own defense of closed systematicity within’ (10)—a ‘techno-capitalist Jihad’ emerging (like ‘blowback’) from within a CIA-funded Afghan mujahedeen; Guantanamo bay as ‘the death of international law perpetrated by those who should precisely initiate and uphold the law’; Mohammed Sadique Khan recruiting his cell in a ‘community programme funded by Leeds multicultural initiatives’; ‘the projection of an image of war as the exploitation of terror in the name of the traumatism of “9/11” that is also a form of ‘auto-immunitary perversion’ (12).

In other chapters, a close reading of Derrida’s essay from ‘68 on ‘The Ends of Man’ opens a rereading of the role that Vietnam plays in the essay’s argument, rearticulating not only questions of political engagement but the proximities and differences between wars in Vietnam and Iraq. Derrida’s essay on ‘Interpretation at War: Kant, the Jew, the German’ is reread in order to parse out the implications of a text initially presented in Jerusalem at the moment of the first Intifada, while Derrida’s reading of Plato’s *khora* opens toward a rethinking of concepts of sovereignty in Cyprus that remain irreducible to forms of national identity. And in a further chapter, the work of the contemporary media and their ‘inscriptions’ of war and terrorism are reread through the concept of telepathy (pain at a distance), suggesting how ‘the experience of deferred meaning in telepathy (the result of meaning passing through media) precisely characterized the revolutionary problematic of the unconscious which psychoanalysis as an ontotheology, if not a science, at once exposes and continually attempts to repress’ (57). Here Freud’s own writings on telepathy—writings which already addressed the work of mourning in relation to the traumatic experience of war—suggest new ways in which (as the writings on telepathy by Derrida and Nicholas Royle also forcefully suggest) the rhetorical relation of transference and metaphor informing telepathic communication intersects with the new ‘technomedia wars’ of the last decade, as well as with the increasingly complex intersections between modernity, secularization, nihilism, the return of the religious, and the role of media and tele-technologies. Lastly, and again drawing from Derrida, the chapter on ‘Hungary in deconstruction’ rethinks the role of the former Soviet satellite states in Central and Eastern

Europe and the events of '56 in relation to the formation of Cultural Studies (a topic also explored by Stuart Hall (2010)), at the same time as it demands that we need a more nuanced understanding of post-colonial discourse within this historical and geo-political conjuncture (here the writings of leading figures such as Gayatri Spivak or Homi Bhabba would not always have the same critical pertinence for thinking the relation between the colonial dependencies of former Soviet satellite states, regional conflict in Eastern Europe, and post-communism).

Through these 'oblique encounters' with different events and conflicts, *Deconstruction After 9/11* is at its most compelling and persuasive when close readings are not reducible to the thematic summaries suggested above but demonstrate a delicate and intricate weaving of texts, concepts, events, dialogues, voices, and conjunctures, both within and across chapters—a reading of Benjamin on violence opens into Derrida on justice and the law, which is displaced by Kant's presentation of perpetual peace, which in turn suggests how Levinas on Zionism or de Man on Rousseau open toward a careful unpacking of the aporias informing hospitality in the contemporary contexts of the Middle East. It is perhaps less a question of offering thick descriptions than of rearticulating the scope of Derrida's thinking and the continued critical pertinence of his writings, not only in light of the events and conflicts which he himself addressed in his own lifetime but in reference to events and conflicts in which his legacy and deconstruction's promise continues to find itself repeatedly implicated, re-iterated, and inscribed.

If *Deconstruction After 9/11* is largely free of polemic, there are moments when McQuillan appears to target certain strands of contemporary, critical thought. Here the text offers an occasional challenge to 'the age of Cultural Studies,' including its 'tyrannous reign' (65) and 'weak ontology of the popular' (72), even as a more nuanced reworking of 'Cultural Studies-as-deconstruction' is deemed capable of engaging critically with 'the productive crisis of the accelerated mutations of the epoch of new materialities that we have already entered alongside the war in Iraq' (79-80) as well as offering a 'new anthropology whose anthropos place[s] man within the economy of planetary life-forms in a post-carbon global horizon' (80). At other times, beyond the unexplored provocation that decisions proposed by NATO have 'concentrated the bureaucracy of international law into a narrower and unchallenged set of interests, namely the violence of Western capitalism' (46), and beyond the proposal that it is still Marx's analysis of the

‘indefatigable routes of capital and the inexhaustible powers of reinvention of the political class’ that illuminates the ways in which democratic institutions have become ‘the levers for the dialectical recuperation of the states of Eastern Europe by global capital’ (134), we also sense a more or less implicit provocation with Marxism and certain tenets of post-Marxist thinking (one might refer here above all to the writings of Laclau and Mouffe), so that ‘a fundamental deconstruction of Western ontology upon which occidental imperialism is predicated will have far more profound effects in the long run of history than a replay of that ontological order as antagonism’ (68). It is also difficult not to read McQuillan’s references to de Man as often comprising a more or less veiled response to the writings of Alain Badiou, so that in a commentary on de Man’s reading of Rousseau’s *The Social Contract*, to take one example (and Rousseau is no innocent example for Badiou), McQuillan argues that the dichotomy between the performative and the constative opened though an allegorical reading of Rousseau’s text cannot be detached from the undecidable ‘discrepancy’ opened up ‘between political action and political prescription’ (123) (the latter a key term in Badiou’s writings). One might also imagine that the numerous references to the former Yugoslavia in the writings of Žižek (surprisingly never cited in a book that insists on the importance of rethinking this conflict in the Balkans) offer an important series of reflections that would extend and deepen many of the gestures to Godard’s *Notre Musique* in the text.

More problematically, perhaps—at least given the explicit emphasis on war and 9/11 framing the book—the lack of reference to other writings seeking to offer new conceptual genealogies of the political in the context of war and the war on terror becomes more conspicuous. Here one might ask about the rapport opened up between McQuillan’s readings of given conflicts and other ways of reconceptualizing the ‘representational matrix,’ ‘idioms,’ or ‘material inscriptions’ of war and the war on terror—the ways in which McQuillan’s brief references to events being ‘theatricalized by spectacles’ (18) have been taken up by the Retort collective (2005), or the ways in which the references to ‘affect’ (and we might insist that they are as much visual as written) have been taken up by Brian Massumi and others in light of the events of 9/11 and logics of preemption (2005, 2007), or the ways in which the brief references to the concept of Empire placed ‘in deconstruction today’ (174) might also include an extensive rethinking of war and democracy in Hardt and Negri’s *Multitude* (2004). If Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the ‘war machine’ and the ‘Treatise on Nomadology’

(1987) subtends much of this writing, it would be important to recognize that war in this context cannot be reduced in quite the same way to 9/11 as event, or to the range of geo-political contexts that frame many of McQuillan's chapters. As Brad Evans and Laura Guillaume have argued in their introduction to a forthcoming issue of *Theory and Event* on 'Deleuze and War' (2010), the very concept of war itself has become transformed into a 'post-Clausewitzian security terrain,' and in such a way that 'military force and warrior logic operate at the level of the unfolding of social relations rather than simply from the perspective of sovereign statehood.' Exposing the war like origins of all modern forms of civic ordering, the history of state politics becomes the continuation of war by other means, while the primary iterations of warfare today no longer take place between states or within states for the acquisition of state power (as in conventional civil war) but in the realm of the biopolitical and micropolitical, in 'societies of control,' and in forms of everyday governance. In this sense, the production of life becomes inseparable from the production of war and 9/11 and the war on terror become inscribed in a more pervasive display of military logics of preemption as well as the state's production of (in)security. Indeed, as others have pointed out with some frequency, not only is the distinction between war and peace no longer recognizable (as Heidegger had already suggested in 'Overcoming Metaphysics'); the ease with which the Patriot Acts passed into legislation in the U.S. suggests that much of the content was already institutionally, discursively, and biopolitically inscribed in the 'idioms' of everyday life and security routines well before the events of 9/11. Or rather, when McQuillan remarks that the war on terror and permanence of threat 'can reach into every aspect of everyday life,' or into the 'institutions of the mind' and the 'most banal of everyday routines' (14), it would be important to acknowledge that a good deal of writing has focused on precisely these same 'material inscriptions' and this 'representational matrix.'

Drawing from this same body of literature, we might also ask how the writings of Foucault on governmentality might contribute to McQuillan's chapter on Derrida and policy, notably as Foucault's writings have also attempted to rethink "the technocratic space of liberal democracies" (82). No doubt deconstruction's refusal of programmable statements, coupled to the ways in which a deconstruction of policy discourse opens a new concept of the political event and a democracy to come, together contribute to McQuillan's proposal to establish a program for a 'Forum for Philosophy and Policy.' But the absence in the chapter of any

reading of a given policy proposal is instructive. And the absence of reference to any literature inspired by a more Foucauldian reading of governmentality prompts us to imagine a more sustained intersection between McQuillan's provocation to rethink policy and the already extensive literature devoted to this same task. Similarly, a reading of Derrida's *Rogues* and the necessity 'to deconstruct both the ontotheological principle of the indivisibility which structures the idea of the sovereign and the sovereign right to exemption from the law which the sovereign itself upholds' (31), opens directly onto the writings of Giorgio Agamben (2005) as would McQuillan's exemplary close reading of the intersection between the individual, the sovereign State, and executive power in de Man's reading of *The Social Contract*. Agamben's extensive rethinking of concepts of sovereignty, the state, citizenship, and rights might also fold in challenging ways across McQuillan's commentary on Said's 'deconstructive' proposals concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, about which Agamben has also written, as well as a number of other contexts in *Deconstruction After 9/11* where these same range of political concepts are also addressed, even if not 'deconstructed' in the sense in which Derrida might understand the term. Finally, one might argue that it is precisely in light of much of this other literature that some of the most challenging confrontations with state sovereignty and forms of resistance have come into conceptual focus. If Naomi Klein's influential *No Logo* is understood by McQuillan as a 'metonymy' for anti-capitalist protests, suggesting that it remains necessary to distinguish Derrida's 'New International' from 'all the re-emergent specters of Poujade' (94) (for which the argument of *No Logo* is said to represent an exemplary instance), then it is precisely through much of this other literature and its emphasis on new conceptual genealogies of sovereignty and the political that other ways of conceiving anti-capitalist (and anti-war) protests have begun to emerge, and in ways that *No Logo* might be considered perhaps less of a specter than a smokescreen.

No doubt this other literature and the potential readings, conversations, disputes, and conflicts of interpretation it opens up are waiting in the wings of *Deconstruction After 9/11*, haunting its margins. It might even be unjust to cite them in such abbreviated form here were it not that the framing of the book in terms of war and the war on terror are precisely the terms that animate an increasingly large body of literature far from the Derridean corpus. But it is also clear that McQuillan's interests in writing *Deconstruction After 9/11* appear to lie elsewhere. For the ambition

suggested throughout is to defend deconstruction above all by refusing the reduction of Derrida's writings to a 'well-intentioned liberalism' (108). As McQuillan asks with impatience and clear exasperation (and one can easily imagine the contexts in which this (still) becomes necessary to ask): 'When will we be rid of the notion that someone must stand on a picket line in the name of deconstruction before its political nature is taken seriously?' (93). What 'textual activism' would begin to account for in such a context is not only that 'the idea of the picket line must always already be in deconstruction' (93) or that tele-technologies such as e-mail jamming might transform the space of the political today (185); 'textual activism' would also be governed by a 'judicious patient rationalism' (7), open to and simultaneously opening up 'the "world" of the enlightenment to come' (as Derrida phrases it in *Rogues* and as Žižek once wished for in the reception of Lacan). Indeed, from the opening lines of the book, what is affirmed throughout is deconstruction's rapport with a new form of 'Enlightenment-without-conditions' (ix); 'in the absence of any programmable response to the situations of the contemporary public space and out of respect for the singularity and alterity of the new day that arrives tomorrow, each time we respond in vigilance to what calls for thought and action we must reimagine that answer anew as a creative act of an unconditional rationality' (ix). It is in this sense that reading and 'textual activism' would be nothing less than a mode of existing in the world, an 'interminable, unconditional critical liveliness to the world around us, its histories, and its future' (xi) (and here we might hear one of those moments of de Manian affirmation that punctuate the text with some frequency). If philosophy's 'task' lies in its affirmation of alterity and singularity—and an affirmation that unfolds by refusing the distinctions between theory and practice, text and world, that close off the force of the event and the encounter—then such an enlightened affirmation would not only 'think the truth to power' but define a form of textual activism that is not a 'counter-force' to power but 'a submission to a wider rhythm which undoes the very vertices of the sovereignty of power' (32)—in short, such a task would lend itself both to 'a mode or idiom of deconstruction not yet realized' (154), as well as to a 'linguistics of literariness' that becomes (in de Man's own words) a 'powerful and indispensable tool in the unmasking of ideological aberrations' (cited 91). This affirmation is thus a constitutive aspect of McQuillan's lucid unraveling of the strands that bind deconstruction to rethinking what constitutes the political today, which includes not only the 'ongoing deconstruction of historicity as it unfolds before us as "politics"' (x) but a 'redistribution of the

possible and impossible within political culture' (15). As de Man himself would acknowledge, this affirmation not only leaves the text open to (mis)reading but suggests the multiple ways in which we are bound to (mis)read *Deconstruction After 9/11* 'as a promise of political change' (de Man 1979: 277).

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