

REVIEW ARTICLE

MICHAEL MARDER, *The Event of the Thing: Derrida's Post-Deconstructive Realism*

University of Toronto Press, 2009

Christopher Stokes (University of Exeter)

Michael Marder's thorough and provocative study repositions Derrida's work, away from the sign and towards the concrete: the latest in a long line of attempts to clarify deconstruction's legacy and to redeem Derrida's corpus from clumsy reductionism. Hence, where we have in recent decades confronted Derrida's phenomenological, political, ethical and theological, Marder presents us with Jacques the realist. Whilst such a proposition may seem counter-intuitive, given the oft-misinterpreted aphorism from *Of Grammatology* that there is nothing outside the text, this book presents a compelling and persuasive case for the persistence of the thing as a fundamental term of analysis in deconstruction. As this book traverses every major trope in Derrida's philosophy – from auto-affection to the gift, from the chora to the signature – one finds out that innocuous thing, the thing, *la chose*, has been there all along, in nearly every corner of deconstruction.

The recurrent motif, for Marder, is a simultaneous offering and concealment of the thing, apparent in and fundamental to the very structure of experience. Such logic, familiar from Heidegger although modified and deepened here, evokes an ontology inadequate to itself: the ideal(ist) structures of conceptualisation and representation which bring phenomena to articulation are always stratified by remainders, excesses and secrets. Derrida has always insisted that presence is always intertwined with non-presence, and Marder turns this thesis towards a certain kind of materialism whereby the thing withdraws as – and precisely because – it is presented. Binding the thing to the spectrality of *différance*, Marder suggests that the givenness of experience is set within an abyssal counter-movement: 'this fugal moment, the flight of the thing itself, is its flight *from itself*...the thing becomes other and renders itself accessible, when it strips itself of its self-identity *and*, more interesting still, when it is most 'itself' in the internal unfolding of its otherness' (24). First worked out via Derrida's readings of Heidegger, this notion of the withdrawn-offered thing is further substantiated with a turn to a deconstruction of Husserl, where a thingly substrate of *hyle* always eludes the subject's intentional grasp.

Of course, the aspersion that might be cast in the direction of this analysis comes with that other great philosophical resonance of the thing: the Kantian *Ding-an-sich*. When Marder speaks of, for instance, ‘the ideal object, which fails to be integrated within the idealist framework’ (65), one might envisage the book skimming perilously close to reconstituting a noumenal Other which lies on the far side of representation. The danger is that of, quite literally, reifying *différance*. Yet throughout its chapters, and certainly in its tightly argued conclusion, this reading of Derrida maintains a disciplined commitment to immanence. Marder contends that suspicions of a *nouveau* Kantian noumenalism are misplaced: ‘the thing is not a wholly transcendental principle but the spacing fissure or the concrete opening of the world *in* the world’ (136). This is apparent in the emphasis on the evental nature of the thing, but also in the study’s continuous interest in remains and remainders, debris and the inassimilable. If things withdraw, fugally, from themselves, then this is legible not in some kind of transcendently constituted object, but in things with the strange ontology and temporality of the cinder, the seal, the tomb, the fragment: that is, to say, presences shot through with absence. Marder terms this a ‘realism of the remains...of resistance to idealization on the ‘inner front’ of idealism’ (137). If representation is, broadly speaking, inadequate to the thing (which is to say, ultimately, that the thing is inadequate to itself), then it is on the *immanent* effects and after-effects of such inadequacy that Marder stakes his cardinal claims.

As mentioned above, this realism of the remains is first articulated through out-and-out phenomenology, and the whole study has a phenomenological tone. After setting out the self-effacing structure of thinghood via Heidegger in the first chapter, the second follows its reading of Husserl and intentionality with more specific analyses of three senses: hearing, touch and sight. All these readings follow the same basic pattern, whereby the object of the sense comes to disrupt intentionality, as when the auto-affective circuit of hearing oneself speak is broken by hetero-affectivity, or when Derrida argues touch never completes the work of touch, since there is always the narrowest interval separating the touching and touched surfaces. Here, as throughout the book, Marder always stays faithfully close to a relevant Derrida text. Although framed, naturally enough, through the thing, these are analyses that are familiar to any moderately experienced reader interested in deconstruction: something on which I will comment further below.

Marder then widens his scope, with a chapter on fetishism that draws together – perhaps somewhat awkwardly – Derrida’s writings on psychoanalysis and the commodity. With the core thesis of the study by now well-established, and its motifs (*Ereignis* in abyss, the fugal, etc.) familiar to the reader, we once again see the thing leaving remains and remainders across the surface of representation, as symptoms of its withdrawal. Thus, for instance, deconstruction and psychoanalysis are jointly articulated against idealism, for they both come up against the resistance of the thing and must ‘love’ what this resistance leaves behind. The second section, drawing heavily on *Spectres of Marx*, posits the work-thing as occluded behind the ghostly traces of the commodity fetish: in a spectralised world economy, all money is in a certain sense counterfeit. The final chapter turns to Derrida’s writings on aesthetics, spending time, in particular, with the readings made in *The Truth in Painting* (e.g. Van Gogh’s peasant shoes, the interpretation of the *parergon*). Central here throughout is the notion of the subjectile, that is a certain sub-representational and non-identical thinghood underlying the art object, and set free by the aesthetic. Once again, work is a key term, with Marder contending that the artist is never in full control of the material being worked: ‘a model for the schematism I am referring to is the archi-trace built into the thingly substratum itself, for instance, a vein that runs through the stone, and imposes a certain material necessity on the potential form of a future sculpture, a necessity with which the sculptor cannot not contend’ (105). Be it stone, paint, or words, this is the heart of his suggestion that aesthetics is deconstructed by the very thingliness on which the aesthetic work works.

As long as one is convinced that Marder has sufficiently grounded his realism of the remains as an analysis of a haunted immanence, and not reified *différance* as some thing ‘out there’ (i.e. the reversed Platonism against which Derrida has always guarded), this is a rewarding study. It covers an impressive range of relevant texts and although certain aspects of Derrida’s work are inevitably prioritised over others, its analyses of phenomenology, psychoanalysis, commodity and aesthetics are always suggestive. However, there is a certain uncanniness running through the book. Despite offering, on the one hand, what appears to be a very new Derrida, this can

also read like a complex attempt at synthesis or paraphrase: a series of capsule summaries given a measure of contiguity by *la chose*. At times, it articulates readings of essays and books that offer conclusions that are simply predictable. I think that the clue to this effect comes with Marder's identification of 'the non-coincidence with itself' of the thing wherein *différance* dwells' (22). In some senses, the 'thing' here is nothing more radical than a certain synonym for *différance*, and it is worth questioning what is at stake whenever a work on Derrida elevates one particular term (such as *la chose*) to the dominant status accorded the thing here.

My only other criticism would concern the almost total envelopment of the study by 'Derrida'. This can be seen most noticeably in the style: it does seem as if this book is deliberately mimicking Derrida's own prose, which is not necessarily always a positive thing when the language is not in the hands of Derrida himself. This is going to be a frustrating read for anyone not already immersed in the jargon and playful syntax of High Deconstruction. More importantly, though, Marder does not engage with any dialogues outside of those already initiated by the Derrida texts he is examining. It seems to me that a 'realist' or 'thingly' Derrida could be brought into a series of interesting and important philosophical relationships: with Jean-Luc Nancy's work on *exscription*, with Jean-Luc Marion's theories of the saturated phenomena, with Deleuzian and Kristevan analyses of materiality, with the so-called speculative realists (e.g. Quentin Meillassoux), and even with the continuing tradition of realism as it is found in analytic philosophy. Whilst this is, of course, a book that is presented and entitled as a study of Jacques Derrida, I would nevertheless hold that Derrida's legacy is most valuably understood, articulated and served if it is brought into a wider philosophical context. A book *on* Derrida need not to be a book so completely enclosed *by* Derrida.

Christopher Stokes is a Teaching Fellow at the University of Exeter. His publications include *Coleridge, Language and the Sublime* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) and articles in 'Studies in Romanticism', 'Textual Practice' and 'Women's Writing' (among others). His research interests include Romanticism, the intersection between literature and religion, and literary theory (especially Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, phenomenology and the so-called 'theological turn')