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*CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 1 (ISSN 2454 -9495)
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Susanne Lüdemann, *Politics of Deconstruction: A New Introduction to Jacques Derrida*, Stanford University Press, 2014. Pp. 157, ISBN 9780804784139, Price Rs. 1482.*

Perhaps the first thing to be noted regarding the book under review is the slightly misleading nature of its title. Early responses to Derrida's thought (mostly in Anglophone academic circles) included allegations that it was "aestheticizing" and "nihilistic." Scholars who drew upon deconstruction in their work would often be met with demands to deliver a "proper" politics. The phrase "politics of deconstruction" immediately brings to mind such a time. Lüdemann's introduction, by contrast, elucidates Derrida's deconstruction of given conceptions of the political (in chapters 3 and 4); this is done broadly under two headings: the thought of "undeconstructibles" (justice, the gift) and the democracy to come.

The preface elaborates Lüdemann's concerns regarding projects of "introductory" writing such as the one she has undertaken and serves to delimit the range of her concerns while reminding us of the constitutive limitations of the genre. What primarily distinguishes this particular book from similar volumes is its strategy. Offering "exemplary readings" of Derrida's texts rather than tidy (and simplifying) summaries of their arguments, the author succeeds in emphasizing just how central reading is to deconstruction. "For Derrida," she observes "reading (reading as inheriting, and inheriting as transformative transmission) represents philosophical practice tout court" (xi-xii).

Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger collectively make up the "history of decentering" to which deconstruction is an heir. Chapter 1 of *Politics of Deconstruction* concerns itself with precisely this inheritance. Lüdemann provides brief and relevant summaries of the major contributions made by these thinkers to the critique of metaphysics and the thinking of difference in its various aspects. Her account of Heidegger's early philosophy is particularly insightful in its elaboration of the essential finitude of Dasein. As a being who finds itself always already thrown into the world, Dasein is cognizant of its own historicity. Simultaneously, as it incessantly projects itself into the

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future, Dasein must also confront its own mortality. As Lüdemann points out, “a being of this kind never can coincide with itself in the experience of full self-presence and identity” (12). Nietzsche’s critique of consciousness and Freud’s model of a divided subjectivity receive similar treatment. Lüdemann draws clear links between the concerns of the three aforementioned thinkers and Derrida’s own project.

What has come to be known as the “linguistic turn” in twentieth-century thought can be said to have inaugurated the closure of metaphysics. The philosophical implications of Saussure’s work are unpacked with particular reference to structuralism, which, following the landmark conference at Johns Hopkins in 1966, is generally understood to have formed the most immediate intellectual paradigm to which Derrida’s work was a response. The second chapter, continuing along these lines, proceeds to outline Derrida’s critique of logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence, offering arguments which have now become familiar: the priority accorded to speech in the Western philosophical tradition has been sustained by the simultaneous repression of writing; speech indicates the presence of an intentional consciousness which can be appealed to in case of linguistic ambiguity in order to provide a determinate meaning. Writing suggests the possible proliferation of meanings in the absence of such a consciousness, and has consequently been regarded with suspicion – and even fear

– by the same tradition. Derrida, in a typical deconstructive move, demonstrated how deeply this seemingly marginal distinction has governed Western philosophy, subsequently showing that writing always and necessarily precedes any particular act of speech. Lüdemann’s strategy pays off here as she closely follows Derrida’s analyses of Rousseau and Saussure in *Of Grammatology*, giving the target audience of the book under review a first taste of what reading – in the deconstructive sense of the word – looks like. Following an interesting exploration of concepts and metaphors, this dense but rewarding chapter concludes with a discussion of the supplement.

The third chapter moves us firmly into the domain of the explicitly political concerns of Derrida’s later work, although Lüdemann never ceases to remind us (and rightly so) that characterizations of deconstruction as an apolitical game of mirrors are wholly misplaced; deconstruction has, from

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the earliest, attempted to lend an ear to the voice of the Other. In his 1990 lecture at a colloquium organized by the Cardozo Law School, Derrida spoke about (legal) judgments, as authorized by law, and justice, in the name of which any legal system acquires its status and authority. He noted that the establishment of any particular system of law occurs at a moment preceding the institution, which arbitrates the legitimacy or illegitimacy of particular instances of violence. This is the “mystical foundation of authority” (61). Judgments, in the specifically legal sense, usually look back to past precedents and make an effort to subsume the phenomenon they are confronted with under a general scheme of positive law. The singularity of each such phenomenon which calls for judgment might consequently suffer neglect, at the risk of injustice. An “undeconstructible” justice, then,

would be constituted by the attempt to address someone or something in its singularity. To understand the contingency and inadequacy of one’s concepts, to suspend them when necessary – that, suggests Derrida, might be the meaning of justice. The “gift” which escapes the economy of exchange is another instance of the undeconstructible, which, we begin to recognize, seems to be characterized by excess, incalculability, and a critique of the form of judgment.

An illuminating commentary on Derrida’s notion of inheritance opens chapter 4, with particular reference to the legacy of Marx and the necessity of dealing with it responsibly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Following from this, Lüdemann outlines Derrida’s critique of the fraternal bond, noting that “brother” and “brotherliness” are “figures that make the political into something natural that seems simply to be given; herein lie all the paradoxes of the modern nation-state” (89). Modern liberal democracies implicitly refer to such stories of familial relations and shared origins to articulate ideals of organic citizenship. While critical of the implied exclusion of women and foreigners from this idea of the political, Derrida does not fail to note that democracy has, in the modern world, held out the promise of emancipation. On the other hand, Hitler also initially came to power by popular vote. “The way democracy endangers itself – the vulnerability of this form of politics – is not an illness or defect to be remedied by political means. Instead – and as we have already observed – the problem inheres in the form itself, which is necessarily disposed to openness

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and uncertainty. In this regard, one can say that a permanent lack of authenticity, meaning, and identity characterizes democracy” (94); this is the logic of autoimmunity. The deconstruction of the proper entails reducing or removing dependence on community-based identifications. The democracy to come would therefore “designate an opening-up to the non- identical – a place of maximum heterogeneity without any common measure” (95). Difference, it will be obvious, is the most consistent concern in Derrida’s work.

The epilogue fruitfully compares and contrasts deconstruction with American pragmatism, speech-act theory, and the New Criticism, as Lüdemann takes the reader on an informed and informative tour of the affiliations and divergences which developed as a result of Derrida’s hospitable reception in the literature departments of American universities. Deconstruction has often naively been read as a dressed-up version of the New Criticism, or a brand of pragmatism, and this section of the book helps considerably in resolving such confusion. A biography sourced from Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida’s Jacques

Derrida (1993-99) is appended to the volume. The bibliography provided does a good job of indicating where a student new to Derrida should go next.

All told, this is a sharp and largely lucid book which will serve the patient and attentive reader well. Lüdemann’s lack of properly critical engagement with Derrida proved to be something of a disappointment for this reviewer, especially considering the decade that has passed since his demise, which should have been enough time not only to assimilate his greatest insights, but also to begin the task of inheriting his intellectual legacy.

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