

4-1986

Wittgenstein and Derrida [Review]

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Repository Citation

Fischer, M. (1986). Wittgenstein and Derrida [Review of the book *Wittgenstein and Derrida*, by H. Staten]. *Philosophy and Literature*, 10(1), 93-97. doi: 10.1353/phl.1986.0019

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Critical Discussion

Wittgenstein and Derrida, by Henry Staten; xxviii & 182 pp. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984, \$19.95.

Discussed by Michael Fischer

WITTGENSTEIN and Derrida, the subjects of Henry Staten's important new book, have met before in contemporary literary theory, usually, however, as enemies or at least as philosophers with antithetical approaches to language. In several articles and at greater length in *Act and Quality* (1981), Charles Altieri, for example, has found in Wittgenstein a powerful challenge to Derridean literary theory, while Christopher Norris in *The Deconstructive Turn* (1983) has argued that Wittgenstein's writings are infected with the skeptical doubts that they supposedly cure. Unlike these critics, Staten proposes allying Wittgenstein with Derrida, an effort that depends on contesting what I would call, following Staten, the "communitarian" or "therapeutic" reading of Wittgenstein and the "terrorist" or "nihilist" reading of Derrida. While Staten complicates these familiar readings, he does not bring about the realignment that he seeks. Even after his painstaking work, the Derridean notions that he grafts onto Wittgenstein still seem out of place.

Staten sees Derrida as a critic of a metaphysical tradition inaugurated by the Greeks and extended by such modern philosophers as Husserl. Much of Staten's introduction ("From Form to *Differance*"), first chapter ("The Opening of Deconstruction in the Text of Phenomenology"), and concluding chapters (grouped under the heading "The Law of Identity and the Law of Contamination") review Derrida's by now familiar deconstructive critique, sympathetically going over such terms as spacing, trace, iterability, and *differance*. As an explicator of Derrida, Staten can be

repetitious, especially toward the end of the book. And he can be unfair to some of Derrida's critics, especially John Searle, whose frequently discussed response to "Signature Event Context" seems to Staten not simply "vacuous" but lazy: "But no matter how traditional or well-entrenched the view, it remains that Derrida has worked out a critique and an alternate structure that he claims has a greater range and power, and it is easier to reassert the canonical concepts he criticizes, as Searle has done, in total ignorance of the full range of the conceptual structure Derrida has worked out as its replacement, than it is to master his arguments and his new logic and *then* to show where they fail" (p. 127). (In a similarly irritated tone, Staten rebukes Searle's essay "The Logical Structure of Fictional Discourse" for its "absurd posturing.") Dividing the world between the hard-working critics who agree with Derrida (thereby demonstrating that they understand him) and the indolent critics of deconstruction who more or less naively reassert what Derrida criticizes has reduced the debate on deconstruction to an often boring shouting match.

Finally, in writing about deconstruction, Staten adopts its worst stylistic traits: ungainly verbs ("separate off" instead of separate, "open out" instead of "open," "normed," and "unlids" are only a few examples); labyrinthine sentences ("The iterability of a code ruptures its authority because it makes it essentially permeable to the deformations of context and yet makes it independent of the power of any given context to determine its meaning once and for all, because the sign carries an irreducible structure that will not let itself be absorbed into a present intention that would fix it in relation to an intentionally totalizable present context" [p. 123] is a mild example); and Francophile idioms (e.g., "To think an essential law of contingency, as Derrida does, is to generalize as a 'grammatical rule' the principles of the kind of critique that Wittgenstein here instantiates" [p. 18]).

These shortcomings, however, are the other side of Staten's strengths, in particular his enthusiasm for the ideas he is discussing and his refusal to simplify complex texts. His patient, detailed treatment of *Speech and Phenomena*, a work often passed over by literary critics, is especially good. Instead of setting up Husserl as a straw man whom Derrida can easily knock down, Staten shows that rigorously working through Husserl's work is a precondition for deconstructing it. His evenhanded commentary persuades me not only that Derrida is a careful reader of Husserl but that Husserl may have been right in thinking that phenomenology completes the project begun by Greek philosophy.

As mentioned earlier, in order to align Derrida with Wittgenstein, Staten has to overturn the still popular image of Derrida as a freewheeling

anarchist. Staten's commentary accordingly proceeds along the following lines: (1) According to Staten, Derrida questions such supposedly metaphysical notions as identity, completeness, "object-talk," intention, wholeness, seriousness, order, reference, essence, unity, presence, and consciousness. (2) But, while Derrida questions these terms, he is not refuting, destroying, or denying them (as many opponents of deconstruction have charged). (3) Instead, Derrida is merely (or only) modulating, resituating, displacing, suspending, unsettling, or complicating these terms in order to release the presumably exciting new possibilities philosophers since Plato have repressed. In brief, for Staten "it is not a question of giving up idealization [or metaphysics], but of modulating it, of allowing it to open out onto some possibilities that have not been conceivable under the old formulas" (p. 24). (See also pp. 47-48, 152, 155, among many other references that I might cite.)

This is a sophisticated reading of Derrida, which is not to say that it is free of problems. I would argue that Derridean critics cannot have it both ways: the same argument that belittles the fear of antideconstructionists (that chaos has come again) also undermines the hope of some prodeconstructionists (that significant change is about to occur). In the scheme that I have just outlined, the dismissive, nothing-to-worry-about tone of step (2) defuses the liberationist, new-age-about-to-dawn rhetoric of step (3): hence the irredeemable vagueness of the possibilities that Staten celebrates.¹

I am less interested here in the implications of Staten's approach to Derrida than I am in the problems it poses for his attempt to group Derrida with Wittgenstein. To bring out Wittgenstein's resemblance to Derrida, Staten has to chip away at the familiar image of Wittgenstein as a therapist who answers philosophical questions by appealing to shared forms of life or ordinary language-games, where philosophical concerns presumably never arise. Against this view, Staten points out in his second chapter ("Wittgenstein Deconstructs") that the rules of these games are not inflexible guidelines forever ruling out change, variation, and uncertainty. In Wittgenstein, Staten remarks, we follow these rules like "a blind man feeling his way with his stick . . . constrained by the accidental [as opposed to the essential or ontological] at every turn" (p. 94). The absence of any firm boundary around our concepts exposes them to endless probing, "since it is impossible to tell in advance where this questioning should stop" (p. 158), where seriousness, for example, turns into nonsense.

Staten is right to suggest that Wittgenstein and Derrida thus overlap in challenging the rigidity, or what Staten wants to call the "superhardness,"

of identity, essence, and the other “metaphysical” terms mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, from this starting point it seems to me that Derrida and Wittgenstein take different paths. Derrida, as Staten astutely reads him, speaks of contaminating or infecting metaphysical categories with the impurities that they try to exclude. From Derrida’s point of view, for instance, “‘Repeatability,’ as the condition for the existence of all idealities, whether they are the ‘senses’ or real or ideal objects, turns out to infect the entire domain of presence” (p. 50). (See also pp. 52, 63, and 84 for much the same metaphor.) Similarly, perforating the boundaries of the self allows (or forces) it to be “illimitably torn and carried away into an illimitable spread of new contexts” (p. 147). On the way to selfhood, in this view, we “fall” into a “perverse activity of invention, of fictionalization, *Erdichtung*” and disintegration that leaves us only with “accidental transformations of related assemblages of inessentials” (pp. 85–86). In these deflating comments, Derrida (or Staten) is not so much bringing us down to earth as rubbing our noses in it, as in something unsavory.

For Wittgenstein, instead of dispersing or scattering the self, the allegedly perverse activity described by Staten constitutes the self. Invention and so on characterize how humans acquire their identity, not how they lose it. I would make much the same response to the other examples taken by Staten from the *Investigations*. Reading, for instance, is not infected but shaped by “what is not reading” (pp. 83–84). Similarly, when we extend a mathematical series, learn a language, bring words home, or follow a rule, our stumbling describes how we carry on instead of annulling our progress. In each case Wittgenstein uses contingency, variability, and temporality not to sully traditional philosophical categories but to humanize them. Derrida’s demystification-with-a-vengeance thus gives way to a probing that reaches bedrock in what we (humans) do (*Philosophical Investigations*, §217).

I do not want to exaggerate the neatness of this resolution, as if Wittgenstein had in mind comfortably settling down and not the hard, frustrating work of digging until, as he says, “the spade is turned.” Like Derrida, Wittgenstein is always wary of the possibility of dogmatism, of our confusing getting tired with reaching bedrock. Even so, from Wittgenstein’s point of view, digging can arrive at firm ground as well as break it up. Giving grounds—like testing, explaining, teaching, and reading—thus comes to an end somewhere but that end is what Wittgenstein calls in *On Certainty* “an ungrounded way of acting” (§110). As Stanley Cavell has put it in “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy,”

We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation — all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls “forms of life.” Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this.²

The “nothing more” in this formulation always provides an opening for skepticism, the “nothing less” a way of containing, though never eliminating, skeptical doubt.

While Staten recognizes some differences between Wittgenstein and Derrida, he minimizes them, only belatedly admitting in his conclusion that “the deconstructive moment of Wittgenstein’s writing is not the whole story” (p. 156). I agree with this concession, though in my view it strains the alliance that Staten has been trying to forge. In calling Wittgenstein’s later work “consistently deconstructive” (p. xvi), Staten properly emphasizes Wittgenstein’s interrogating the invariable essences and fixed rules that have held traditional philosophy — and some of Derrida’s critics — captive. But Staten loses sight of the constructive lesson that Wittgenstein went on to affirm: “*essence* is expressed by grammar,” not perverted by it (*Investigations*, §371).

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1. I develop this argument at much greater length in my *Does Deconstruction Make Any Difference?* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), Chapters 5 and 6.

2. Stanley Cavell, “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy,” *Must We Mean What We Say?* (1969; rpt. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 52.