

JACQUES DERRIDA S *SPECTERS OF MARX* AT THE INTERSECTION OF PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE

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Abstract: *This paper reads Jacques Derrida s Specters of Marx as a singular instance of the blurring of the borders between literature and philosophy. While the dialogue or even interpenetration of these fields is by no means new, Derrida s case is original inasmuch as he adopts a micrological strategy of interpretation that is closely related to what became known in literary studies as close reading. The paper argues that a unique truth-effect is thereby constructed, one that heavily relies on compositional procedures, here construed as framing, interrogating and argument weaving. The experience of textuality thus produced is then contrasted to that of the culture industry.*

Key-words: *Deconstruction; Marxism; Literature; Philosophy.*

Jacques Derrida is well known for his capacity to dis-locate or un-locate, if you will, the place of philosophy. This happens by means of a practice of reading and writing (one implying the other) that establishes close ties to the literary. At first sight, this is not to be wondered at, for, increasingly since Freud, philosophical/theoretical discourse has relied on literature to derive its most fundamental insights. Indeed, it is possible to say without much exaggeration that from Benjamin to Deleuze, from Adorno to Lyotard, all relevant philosophers of the twentieth century have in one way or another made use of literary texts to help with their own thinking. What is peculiar to Derrida, however, is that literature in his hands ceases to be a source of inspiration or wellspring of possible ideas or types, to become a *model* for the interpretation and handling of texts. In other words, Derrida s focus on details, together with his disposition to turn the textual object (philosophical or otherwise) against itself, reminds one of recent, post-new-critical practices of close reading. This kind of blurring of the limits between the literary and the philosophical goes in fact a long way towards explaining Derrida s stunning success in English and Comparative Literature departments in the Anglophonic world.¹

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¹ Of course, another reason for this is to be found in the hegemonic role of analytical philosophy in the English-speaking world. By purging philosophy of most of its traditional questions (such as the meaning of existence, the notion of truth or the nature of good and evil), the analytical tradition has deprived philosophy of much of its interest. One should also note in passing that Derrida is a prominent representative of a new discursive formation called simply Theory. See my "Breves observações sobre a Teoria, suas contradições e o Brasil (DURÃO, 2004).

Nonetheless, one may very well argue that there is a structural problem in this symbiosis of philosophy and literature, that as a presupposition differentiating both discourses is an underlying understanding of what reality is, regardless of how one is to understand the thorny concept of "reality". One can do whatever he or she wants with a literary text because it is self-professedly a fictional object, something deprived of any claim to truth, and which does not interfere, at least immediately, in the way individuals go about doing their own businesses. This is why, incidentally, fiction may have an interesting cognitive role, for precisely because of its detachment from the reproduction of the everyday it may exhibit a different kind of truth, non-subjective and non-intentional. Adorno's idea of an "exact imagination" meant exactly that, an imaginative approach to texts which would be exact insofar as it would be able to pin down something analytical reason could not apprehend (for a very good commentary, see NICHOLSEN, 1997). But even so, in Adorno's case, the difference between fiction and reality remained a presupposition for subsequent interpretative work: it was precisely because of their division, of their being apart, that they could interpenetrate.

The testing ground to verify whether a micrological, imaginative, or literary-like interpretation of a theoretical text is valid – this is my first claim – cannot be purely conceptual, but must be anchored in experience, here understood as a mediating instance, an impulse linking what is lived to what is thought, a "click, if you will, that makes one spontaneously say "this is it!"; or, in still another formulation, an effect of meaning that catches the subject by surprise and obliges him or her to conceptualize it *post factum*. A proper discussion of the concept would take us too far afield; suffice it to say at this point that the concept of "experience" has a long history behind it, especially in the tradition of German Idealism and subsequent developments in philosophy, whose main representatives are no doubt T.W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin. For them experience (in the sense of the German *Erfahrung*, and not *Erlebnis*) is connected to a mimetic impulse, something both shaped by and revolting against instrumental rationality, that kind of mental disposition that irremediably severs means from ends and subjects any content whatsoever to calculating principles (an interesting assessment is provided by BERNSTEIN, 2001).

This theoretical framework, the nonconceptual definition of the concept of experience, is important here because it helps resituate Derrida's much-commented *Specters of Marx*, offering the possibility for a new kind of understanding of the text. Published in French in 1993, the book is the result of Derrida's lectures at a conference named "Whither Marxism?", which took place in the same year, and is also the title of the volume containing selected contributions from authors who took part in it (MAGNUS & CULLENBERG, 1995). The ambiguity was intentional: "where was Marxism going (whither), but also "was Marxism disappearing (wither)? The occasion was particularly relevant because a direct dialogue between Derrida and Marx had been eagerly expected. True, Derrida's pronouncement had been preceded by a number of attempts to approximate and confront deconstruction and Marxism – such as

Michael Ryan's often quoted *Marxism and Deconstruction; a Critical Articulation* (1982), or the Winter 1985 issue of *Diacritics* – but not until then had Derrida himself devoted a whole work to the interpretation of Marx. Indeed, *Specters of Marx* triggered one of the most interesting intellectual debates in recent years, forcing Marxists and deconstructionists, in journals as *Diacritics* and *Radical Philosophy* as well as in Michael Sprinker's *Ghostly Demarcations*, to settle accounts in a much more definitive way than ever before. The list of names that participated in the discussion is impressive, ranging from orthodox Marxists such as Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton, to so-called post-Marxists as Ernesto Laclau, post-colonial critics as Gayatri Spivak, and many others.²

For the purposes of this text, however, the confrontation between deconstruction and Marxism is significant because Marxism itself can be conceived of as a philosophy of experience *par excellence*. Its utmost horizon is that of a universal history of human suffering and oppression, so cogently elaborated by Jameson (1981) among others, and which can only be vindicated through some kind of experience of it. Terms such as capitalism or class struggle, in other words, have no meaning when torn apart from the universe of pain they must be felt to belong to. Deconstruction cannot appeal to this immediate kind of experience (incidentally so easily to be had in Brazil), for its concepts, such as the famous *différance* (and so many others, because one of Derrida's most cherished practices was of continuous neologization) cannot be directly applied to "reality". They must rather be seen as textual constructs. And this is my second claim, namely, that the strength of Derrida's texts lies in his ability to *form* their con-texts of experience. It is not the case, to put it differently, that Derrida's elaborations may be immediately extrapolated to "reality", but rather that his texts themselves must provide the raw material, as it were, from which the labor of interpretation is to be developed. A circuit of self-referentiality is thus constituted, which should be minimally explained below.

But before approaching how this may be done in *Specters of Marx*, it is important to call attention to the role played, and the function fulfilled, by literature itself in the book. For one thing, the text is almost as much about Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as it is about Marx, and what is perhaps the main concept of *Specters of Marx*, that of "hauntology" – not ontology, but hauntology as derived from the verb "to haunt" – is of course inspired by the apparition of the ghost of Hamlet's father in the play. A strong intertextual link is thereby established that invites interpretation and further approximations of the two texts. For the concept of hauntology – which could very grossly be defined as the most concrete presence of what is most immaterial, something that can be best defined through its effects – works both ways: it may point to the play *Hamlet* thus infecting both

² It should go without saying that this debate is particularly relevant in the Brazilian intellectual context, where Marxists and deconstructionists seldom, if ever, interact. An exception, however, is Annamaria Skinner (2000); for a fuller assessment of the Marx-Derrida controversy see Durão (2006).

Marx and Derrida's book, but it can also be applied, from a Derridean perspective to Shakespeare's text itself. Furthermore, it is this double movement that allows the deconstruction of Marx and Engels' *The German Ideology* under the aegis of the specter. Marx, Engels, Shakespeare, Hamlet all start to constitute a zone of indifferentiation where not only different genres of writing are blurred (political pamphlet, philosophical essay, tragic drama) but also where they are shown to be governed by the same logic of spectrality.³

Now, this zone of indistinctness should not be viewed as the result of carelessness, as though thinking and separation (as in the etymology of the word "discernment") necessarily implied each other. On the contrary, the bursting asunder of fields is here only attained through a very careful work in/of Derrida's text itself. Indeed, if I'm less concerned at this point with a philosophical/philological explication of concepts than with the description of a certain linguistic *modus operandi* of Derrida's texts in general and *Specters of Marx* in particular, this not only because there are a number of competent commentaries available for readers of English,⁴ but also because traditionally critics emphasize the clarification of Derrida's concepts and what they *mean*, only rarely how they *work*. I would like then to call attention to three textual strategies that allow Derrida to construct the experience of truth, strategies that to a great extent endow *Specters of Marx* with its persuasiveness. One hardly needs to point out that they are not exhaustive, and that several other rhetorical procedures might also be adduced.⁵

The first one is the abundance of frames in his works, of elements mediating the "content proper and the text's outside. Exordia, introductions, prefaces, prologues, but also post-scriptums, addenda and the like are not rare in Derrida's works. True, Derrida himself discussed borders and frames, trying to show the impossibility of neatly separating the inside from the outside, since one contaminates the other. But still, the fact that Derrida makes borders a topic, something to be deconstructed, does not dissolve our own experience of them as such. Nothing prevents, in other words, that borders be used as part of a textual strategy aiming at proving the impossibility of borders. Taking frames already at the start as impossible entities would beg the question of their functioning. For how would one otherwise account for such an abundance of borders as in the French edition of *Specters of Marx*, where one finds, after the cover: four blank pages, another one containing just "COLLECTION LA PHILOSOPHIE EN EFFET, then the title, then the title with subtitle, then a

³ There is still another possible way of thinking about spectrality, and that is in relation to the whole computerized world, the so-called virtual universe. In this case the blurring of boundaries becomes even more drastic.

⁴ The best reading of *Specters of Marx* is that of Fredric Jameson, in *Ghostly Demarcation*.

⁵ To name just one such rhetorical procedure, it would be interesting to analyze Derrida's unwillingness to close series or lists of items, and the ease with which he uses the enfeebling particle "etc."

note on the conference “Whither Marxism, then a two-page long dedication in italics, then an exordium, then an exergue with a passage from *Hamlet*. It is only after all this that the reader sees the beginning of the text proper. These frames, it should be obvious, separate the text’s center from its exterior, in what seems to be a continuous effort (that’s the whole gist of the deconstructive project) to prove that oppositions such as center and margin, exterior and interior, cannot be sustained.

The second characteristic worth mentioning in this context concerns Derrida’s use of question marks. Interrogations are to be found in all his oeuvre, they are his trademark, and *Specters of Marx* is no exception.⁶ Thus already at the beginning of the book, in the exordium, one reads, in Peggy Kamuf’s translation:

Someone, you or me, comes forward and says: I would like to learn [apprendre] to live finally.

Finally, but why?

To learn to live: a strange watchword. Who would learn? From whom? To teach to live, but to whom? Will we ever know? Will we ever know how to live and first of all what “learn to live” means? And why “finally”?

By itself, out of context but a context, always, remains open, thus fallible and insufficient this watchword forms and almost unintelligible syntagm. Just how far can this idiom be translated moreover? [Apprendre in French means both to learn and to teach, F.A.D.]. (DERRIDA, 1994, p.17)

These questions, which themselves verge on being rhetorical, contribute to textual experience insofar as they summon the reader, invite him or her to engage with the text, regardless of what he or she may think of it, whether the questions should be answered in the affirmative or in the negative, or even if they are just to be kept suspended – which indeed would be the most typically Derridean gesture, the one that would eventually prove the strategy to be effective.⁷

Closely related to question marks, there is a third rhetorical procedure encouraging the formation of a determinate con-text of experience. I have in

⁶ Derrida’s questionings were the object of Terry Eagleton’s malignant parody. Regarding *Specters of Marx*, he teases: “The portentousness is ingrained in the very letter of this book, as one theatrically inflected rhetorical question tumbles hard on the heels of another in a tiresomely mannered syntax which lays itself wide open to parody. What is it, now, to chew carrots? Why this plural? Could there ever be more than one of them? Could this question even have meaning? Could one even speak of the ‘chewing’ of a carrot, and if so how, why, to whom, with what onto-teleo-theological animus? (SPRINKER, 1999, p. 85).

⁷ The penchant for question marks is also an interesting point of comparison between Derrida and Adorno, authors who otherwise would have so much in common. For Adorno *never* uses them in his more important writings, which could be accounted for by the fact that his texts themselves are interrogations, constituted as they are by an evolving play of negations. For an extended articulation of the two see my “Adorno e Derrida: uma tentativa de aproximação (DURÃO, 2005).

mind the way Derrida weaves his arguments in a discontinuous manner, something more clearly to be seen in his later texts than in his earlier, more linguistically oriented ones. Like many other non-Anglophone theorists, Derrida refuses to follow a direct line of reasoning, one that would proceed from cause to consequence, or from thesis and example. Rather, his texts put forth suggestions, insights, or ideas that are soon abandoned, just to be referred to and resumed later on, oftentimes after much textual work. This non-linear argumentative procedure enacts a permanent process of internal self-reference, and just as with the frames and (rhetorical?) questions, this weaving and intertwining of the arguments also enfolds the reader – to be sure, the reader who is willing to put himself/herself in the position of a “follower, and to *make sense* of what could very well be called wandering meaning, zones of coherence interspersed with leaps or opaque moments, not to mention threads that simply aren't resumed and get lost. To give just an example: in the exordium, the ambiguity of the verb *apprendre* in French, which is both to teach and to learn, is followed by considerations on life and death and then by the concept of spectrality as “that which is not . From this we proceed to the “being together with ghosts, the *l'être-avec* them, to the question of justice, inasmuch as “[i]t is necessary to speak *of* the ghost, indeed *to* the ghost and *with* it, from the moment that no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible and thinkable and *just* that does not recognize in its principle the respect for those others who are no longer or for those who are not yet there (p. xix). These topics will afterwards be left aside at the beginning of the text, which will propose the philosopheme of the “out of joint . Again, this accumulation of thematic nuclei does not obey any kind of pre-structured order or framework; it unfolds in what seems an *ad libitum* progression, drawing on all sorts of materials, from literary texts to ambiguities in the French language, or questions of translation. The problem and its working out are both *produced* by the text. Interestingly enough, there is a parallel here to aesthetic experience, for in the same way that the recipient of an artwork must submit himself or herself to the artifact's structure, its internal laws of composition (which may include, say, nonsense, politically infamous, or scatological passages), so must a reader of Derrida enter the text by submitting her desire for meaning to the text's own logic of differing and deferral.

Of course, one may argue that there is a structural difference between the two cases, which would be related to the fictional pact mentioned at the beginning of this paper. As *theoretical* discourse, Derrida's text would be inextricably linked to a certain kind of truth effect very much at odds with art's effects of truth. This generates at least two difficulties. In the first place, it is no use to simply shun the word “truth, as weak deconstructivists do, for thereby a taboo is created and “truth becomes an unutterable concept very much like the devil in the Middle Ages, whose name could not be pronounced. Second, it is worth calling attention to the blatant contradiction involving, on the one hand, a philosophy that emerged targeting that old humanism, challenging the very

concept of Man (not to mention those of the autonomous individual and the sovereign subject), and a textual practice, on the other, that so strongly and, as it seems, so necessarily projects and enunciating “I”, a particular voice or implied author upon which the text is so much dependent and which generates so many followers. In a nutshell: an I-based, anti-I philosophy.

I would like to conclude now with the following observation. I’ve been arguing for the constructed nature of Derrida’s text, and the experience of meaning thereby produced, in opposition to the experience of transhistorical oppression and suffering invoked by Marxism as corresponding to “reality”. Now, it would be utterly incorrect to infer that this concept of “reality” is in any way immediate, spontaneous, natural or even “referential”, to use another favorite term. On the contrary, “reality” is also constructed, also a text, if you will, the difference being only that this text is subject to and controlled by commercial interests and not philosophical/literary concerns. From the point of view of society (especially in Brazil), Derridean difference should be thought together with its very opposite, the endless repetition of the same as fabricated by the culture industry. Adorno goes as far to say that Kant’s schematism – that kind of a priori human mental structure that shapes all experience – provides a useful working model for the way the culture industry pre-forms one’s sense of identity, narrativity and normativity in what eventually becomes an immense reiterative process (ADORNO, 1991, p.61-97).

But how about *Specters of Marx* in this framework? The spectrality the text does manage to give form to is of an ambiguous nature: when viewed in the context of the total oblivion of Marxism, it presents a Utopic dimension, because it shows the persistence of the ghost of Marx, demonstrating that it is not so simple to get rid of him. But the specter may also fulfill a distinct role, namely that of keeping away the concrete possibility of social change. For if the ghost continues to haunt, this is because it cannot be brought to life again, and Derrida’s text may even work to suggest that it is futile to try to do so. Fortunately, this is not something to be decided by *Specters of Marx*, but as the outcome of the interplay of other forces and processes. In fact, this ambiguity is not final, but may be changed with the out-of-joint course of the time. In a better world, difference and the logic of spectrality would be more readily available; present/absent in reality, they would not need frames, question marks and convoluted argumentative lines to be presented.

DURÃO, F. ESPECTROS DE MARX DE JACQUES DERRIDA NA INTERSEÇÃO DA FILOSOFIA E LITERATURA

Resumo: O presente trabalho analisa *Espectros de Marx*, de Jacques Derrida, como um caso singular da dissolução das fronteiras entre literatura e filosofia. Se isso não é rigorosamente uma novidade, Derrida é original

na medida em que sua prática interpretativa é muito próxima do close reading literário. O trabalho defende que um efeito de verdade é assim construído, que faz uso de procedimentos composicionais aqui chamados de enquadramento, interrogação e tecer argumentativo. A experiência da textualidade que se produz desta forma é por fim comparada à da indústria cultural.

Palavras-chave: Desconstrução; Marxismo; Literatura; Filosofia.

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