

Of All Things: On Michael Marder's Reading of Derrida.

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Review of: Michael Marder, *The Event of the Thing: Derrida's Post-Deconstructive Realism*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009. Pp. xx + 186.¹

The Event of the Thing by Michael Marder is probably one of the most comprehensive and integrative readings of Derrida's oeuvre to date. A virtue of the book is that, despite the comprehensiveness of its subject matter, it does not assume the removed posture of an introduction, an exposition, or an explication. Its relation to the Derridian text is much more internal and intimate, and it should be noted that it presupposes a rather thorough knowledge of Derrida's oeuvre as well as of Derrida's philosophical "reading list" (primarily Husserl, Heidegger, Freud, Marx, and Kant).

Marder's confident and elegant prose reveals an original style, distinctly different than Derrida's and yet just as carefully performative and rhythmic. While the text is virtually replete with citation and paraphrases—drawn as if effortlessly in a criss-cross fashion from as many as fifty different texts by Derrida—these are, for the most part, seamlessly woven into it like dialogues in a Saramago novel, rarely interrupting its flow. On occasion, however, Marder pauses on a passage from Derrida that he finds particularly pregnant and embarks upon a word-for-word study that can be truly illuminating. The text follows, to some extent, the pattern of a fugue (a term which serves as a leitmotif in Marder's work, etymologically referring to the act of fleeing [*fugere*] and, by implication, to the fugitive, the

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elusive, the haunting). That is to say, there is a single motif—the event of the thing—that repeatedly makes its entrance (or escape) in differing voices, contexts, and variations, starting from the deconstruction of Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology, going through a deconstruction of Freudian and Marxist reflections on fetishism, and ending in what I consider the most powerful and rewarding segment of the work, the deconstruction of aesthetics. In this review I will not attempt to offer a synopsis of each of these entrees, but remain, by way of an overview, along the text's contours, surveying what I perceive to be some of its overarching motivations and concerns.

On the face of it, Marder's text follows rather persistently, even obsessively (as befits its subject matter), after the thematic of "the thing" in Derrida's work. Insofar as it does that, the text manages to show rather persuasively that, however inconspicuous to readings not attuned to it, "the thing" is virtually omnipresent, if always elusively, in Derrida's writing. However, Marder's line of reading has still greater ambitions than to underscore a particular thematic in Derrida. What we have here is a thorough reconstruction (reweaving or re-texting, if you will) of Derrida's oeuvre as a whole that (re)traces "the event of the thing"—the thing, for Marder, being always eventful and the event always "thingly" (xi)—as the hollow ground—the ground, as "event," being always a "double ground" or an abyss, a preoccupation or obsession—of deconstruction. And so, although *The Event of the Thing* focuses almost exclusively on Derrida's texts and philosophical readings, what it is ultimately preoccupied with is not Jacques Derrida per se but, shall we say, "the thing in itself." We may therefore reverse the initial impression without disqualifying it altogether: "the thing" is not just a theme in Derrida's writing, but Derrida's writing is shown to participate, in a unique and uniquely suggestive way, in the event of the thing.

"Derrida's brand of realism," Marder argues, "inherited the indeterminacy, non-identity and fugal character from the thing 'itself'" (136). To display "the event of *the thing*" as the guiding thread, or obsession, of deconstruction is

already a provocation; especially if we consider that one of the inaugurating gestures of Derrida's work (and, following it, of Marder's book too) is the deconstruction of Husserlian phenomenology, with its famous guiding motto: "to the things themselves!" No superficial reading of Derrida can fail to remark on the hypertextuality of his readings, his seeming resistance to any appeal (the more sophisticated, the more deconstructable) to a "thing in itself," to a transcendental ego or, for that matter, to any supra-textual existence and metaphysical ground. Yet Marder's claim seems to be that this resistance is already the working of the thing itself. It is the thing, not "deconstruction," that eludes and resists contact, while at the same time keeps haunting in unfathomable proximity. The problem, therefore, does not lie in the phenomenological concern for the things themselves (at that, we might say, deconstruction is "quasi-phenomenological"), but rather with the thing's conceptualization and figuration as aim or telos, in a word, as *object* of/for our intentional pursuits.

In a sense, deconstruction is portrayed here as a process analogous to phenomenological *epoché* (reduction), where the thing is that which stubbornly remains or relentlessly returns after every step, every deconstruction, as "the irreducible" or non-deconstructable. However, in distinction from phenomenological reduction, in this process, which is therefore more erratic and rhythmic, less methodic or architectonic, the thing does not answer to the logic of *subiectum* (self-identity/transcendental ground), nor to that of an ideal object or pure meaning, but, instead, to the logic of remains, trace, and supplementation, which cuts against the grain of the phenomenological quest after the pure and the proper.

"Post deconstructive realism," as Marder explains, "is a realism of the remains, which is to say, of resistance to idealization on the 'inner front' of idealism" (137). The thing is what remains, surviving or resisting (at the same time *urging*) all our efforts at ideation, synthesizing (or analyzing), bracketing, as well as their inbuilt deconstructions. Not posited or repeated, the thing obsesses

and returns; “always- already” pre-occupying, it yet never shows up or arrives.

In italics, Marder sums up the crux of this ecstatic movement:

[F]or Derrida, the thing is what remains after the deconstruction of the human, the animal, and the metaphysical belief in the thing itself, in its oneness and self-identity. The thing understood as the remains stands on the side of what has been called “the undeconstructable” within deconstruction itself, of what both animates and outlives the deconstructive goings-through, experiences, or sufferings. (138)

The core gesture of Marder’s text is to suggest that “the thing” is non-identical. While it seems simple and straightforward enough, this gesture proves incessantly fruitful. To begin with, it soon shows itself to be (always) a double gesture. Insofar as “the thing” is “the thing in itself” (not “for us,” not posited or given by or to consciousness) it ought to be autonomous, self-standing, independent, absolutely exterior, and non-relational. But insofar as it is non-identical it can be none of the above. Hence, “‘The’ thing is not the thing itself; it, itself, is a non-thing” (20). Here then is the double gesture around which Marder’s text spins and swirls: *it, itself, is not itself*. At the core of Derrida’s “post-deconstructive realism,” Marder writes, “is found the split thing, the indwelling of *différance*, the concrete figure without figure undermining and invalidating the logical principle of identity. The thing is not the same thing as who or what it is” (135).

As can be sensed in the disjunction “who or what,” frequently recurrent in *The Event of the Thing*, much of what is at stake is the traditional opposition between “the thing” (the impersonal, indifferent, anonymous “it”), answering to the question “what?” and “us” (the habitants and proprietors of the relational, synthesized, appropriated human world), answering to the question “who?” Perhaps a classical case in point (not addressed by Marder, for never taken seriously by Derrida) is that of Jean-Paul Sartre, who famously argued, picking up from Kojève’s Hegel, that “I am what I

am not and I am not who I am.” In other words, the principle of non-contradiction does not apply to human subjectivity or consciousness (the “for-itself”), and hence not to the properly human world. However, the defiance of the principle of non-contradiction is only understood in Sartre against the backdrop of its opposition to “the (mere) thing,” or the “in- itself” (paradigmatically prefigured as a solid, inanimate item such as a piece of furniture), which, by contrast, is perfectly governed by the principle of identity: “it is what it is and it is not what it is not.” What is unsatisfying in this scheme is that, in its opposition to the mere thing (or to anything else for that matter), “the human” proves to be self-identical after all—it is what it is (not a thing) and it is not what it is not (a thing).

Applying to “the thing” what Sartre and others have applied to the human in direct opposition to it, Marder’s Derrida destabilizes all conceptualizations of the human, be it as consciousness, transcendental ego, even as the Heideggerian Dasein (whose “ecstatic relationality . . . is denied to the worldless, breathless, inanimate thing determined in its mute ‘whatness’” [100]). The thing in itself is ever an other to itself, such that “the one who attempts to absolve or separate oneself from it, uttering, for instance, ‘I am *not* a thing’ [or, one might add: ‘I am *not* an animal’], is immediately incorporated into the thing, which is interchangeable with its other” (21). Thus, “the event of the thing participates in the deconstruction of humanism” (109).

In its indeterminacy, non-identity and anonymity “the thing” resists localization on either side of the classical oppositions between the “who” and the “what,” the animate and the inanimate, the living and the dead, or between that which has interiority, intentionality, or freedom and that which has nothing but extension, hardness, and surface. Asserting that life “as a process of othering is no longer other to the ostensibly inanimate thing” (7), Marder’s text continuously “animates” or “inspires” the thing—“it” intends us, “it” breathes for itself, “it” marks and remarks itself, etc.—while never foregoing its strange(r)ness and

muteness. “It” haunts. The goal, finally, is to de-objectify the thing, to decouple “thing” from “object,” without thereby falling back upon the diametrical opposite of objectivity (always presupposed in positing it)—the self-conscious, intentional subject; the self-referring, self-pronoun(c)ing “I.”

At the same time, the thing, while always other (to itself), is also decoupled from the Levinasian absolutely Other, although clearly the Levinasian influence here is at least as strong as it was on Derrida himself. The thing is at once less other than the Other and less the same than “I.” It is less other because it is never “absolutely” exterior, because in its non-identity it is interchangeable with its other. And it is less the same because non-identical “in and of itself” (always already split), and because, to put it quite simply, it may well be void of a properly human visage.

As can be expected, one of the central threads in *The Event of the Thing* is the deconstruction of the thing-sign opposition. The common assumption (often summoning together the seemingly opposing camps of “realism” and “idealism”) is that language, in particular the “conventional” language of signs, falls short of the thing in itself, which is therefore conceived after the model of presence and immediacy. But, to Marder, “The thing impregnated with *différance* will contain, without delimiting it, the principle of signification... ‘*The thing itself is a sign*’ [cited from *of Grammatology*]” (18). This conclusion is in fact begged once we begin to address the thing’s non-identity: whatever it is in the sign that necessarily “falls short” is already in the thing itself. Yet this, Marder would argue, is not a matter of dialectical reconciliation, or of a “textual hyper-idealism.” The non-oppositional, non-negative thing is to remain marginal and “indigestible,” “vomited out” or wasted by the system of conception and signification. Still, Marder suggests, it “would be more productive to locate the margin right *in* the text, that is to say, to pursue the material residue of exteriority (the thing) within language itself.” Here perhaps—in the notions of waste and residue—the tension between philosophy and poetry is called to mind,

invoking the material surfaces, tonalities, frictions, and resistances of purportedly “dead” signs—invoking, indeed, the “thingly” nature of signs, which, before and beyond our meaning- bestowing activity, leaves its (counter)signature and imprint on the text.

Thus, remarking on Derrida’s discomfort with employing the metaphysically charged terms “real” and “realism” (135–37), Marder makes the case that, although Derrida’s conception of “the real” (as “non-negative impossible”) deviates from traditionally realist schemes, one can nevertheless speak of a “post- deconstructive realism” (a phrase coined by Derrida in *on Touching—Jean-Luc nancy*, and serves as subtitle to Marder’s book). In the words of Derrida: “In my view, language has an outside... Something really exists beyond the confines of language... [namely,] the matter of traces derived from various texts” (from “Jacques Derrida in Moscow,” cited on 29).

Eventually, what distinguishes the “real,” or the “thing” for that matter, as the “matter of traces,” from the “real” prefigured as presence, or the “thing” conceived of as identical (indifferent), is the attunement to ecstatic temporality or the “temporal fold” of *différance* within the text:

The reason for the divergence between the “realist” disguises of political history or philosophy and the thing they miss is that they bet on the unproblematic crossing of the textual threshold and, therefore, refuse to operate within the temporal fold of the “always already”... and the “not yet” (temporalizing delay in the thing itself...). This refusal causes realism to lose sight of the remains and to lapse into a pure repetition . . . that puts it on the side of hyper-idealism. (140)

In line with this non-linear temporality, “*post*-deconstructive realism” is invoked as an anachronistic term, a term of anachrony (e.g., 138). If one expects of Marder’s text (and I suspect Marder’s choice of subtitle expects such expectation from the reader) to propose a venue that would follow *after* deconstruction, bringing its textual roller coaster to a halt, and satisfy once and for all the desire to retrieve the “lost

object” or to touch ground, one is in for a good disappointment. Not for a moment does Marder’s text leave the premises of deconstruction. Nevertheless—and this is the contribution of his reconstruction—tracing the fugal trails of “the event of the thing” in Derrida, Marder insists that a post-deconstructive realism is to be found, always already, *within* deconstruction, perhaps as that which, in its escape, in the “not-yet” sense of urgency, *immanently* drives and animates it.

One cannot fail to observe the Heideggerian resonances in Marder’s text, in particular in its emphasis on ecstatic temporality. These resonances should not, of course, come as any surprise. It can be suggested that, to begin with, Derrida’s *différance* is but a radicalization of one of the most constitutive and persistent elements in Heidegger’s thought, namely, the “ontico-ontological difference”: the difference between Being and beings. Heidegger eventually came to place the word “Being” under erasure in his texts in an attempt to emphasize that Being, which is no being, is not a word either. Being is difference/transcendence “pure and simple.” Derrida’s radicalization, if we follow this line of thought, is a radicalization of the *erasure* (or rather its undoing), for it dispenses with the somewhat hyperbolic *reference to* “Being” in Heidegger, a reference which is only fortified when placed *under* erasure, necessarily preceding and surviving it. *Différance*, by contrast, has no referent; it is a sign, and even purely a sign (that is, helplessly impure), since all that marks it out is something as banal as an (inaudible) “spelling mistake.” But only as such does *différance* mark pure difference, different even from (difference) “itself.”

With this in mind, one is tempted to raise a Heideggerian objection to Marder. Marder’s emphasis on “the thing” as the “indwelling of *différance*” may well seem not only to undo the Derridian radicalization just noted, but even to take a step back behind both Derrida and Heidegger. After all, is not “the thing,” looked at from a grammatical point of view, a *noun* (even the noun of all nouns)? And is not Heidegger’s deployment of the grammatically flexible, inherently

ambiguous term “Being” (with or without erasure) precisely an attempt to belie the long list of nouns paraded by the history of philosophy, each one of which standing for *the* ultimate determination of the being of beings (Idea, Reason, Nature, Spirit, etc.)? Is not the “Thing,” which “*pre-occupies* subjects and objects” (118), birthing every unique apparition, yet another (over)determination of the being of beings? And why not just “Being”?

Were we to recoil back to the face-level impression that Marder’s text ought to be read as a scholarly exploration of the thematic of “the thing” in Derrida’s oeuvre—and to be sure, it is outstanding at that—we would probably experience no trouble at all, for the only justification needed in this case would be the acknowledgment that there is such a pervasive thematic in Derrida and that it has not yet been thoroughly studied. But, as suggested, Marder’s text seems more ambitious; “the thing” is not a theme among themes: it is what makes possible or “eventuates” the worldhood of the phenomenological world (135); its “radical and absolute exteriority interiorizes everything, including itself, ad infinitum, even as it disappears with every unique apparition of the phenomena...” (126); its escape “leaves the world in its trail.” (140)

How, then, to justify the privileging of this noun? Why this obsession with the thing, of all things? My own provisional response is that, as Marder himself notes in the introduction to the book, the appeal to “the Thing” is a *provocation* (xi). It is a provocation (as already mentioned) in view of Derrida’s purported break with phenomenology and its appeal “to the things themselves!” And it is a provocation by way of the stubborn attempt to “animate” “the thing”—to break asunder each and every one of its traditional connotations, while using these very connotations to do so. And finally, it is a provocation insofar as it invokes the Heideggerian (or Derridian) objection just noted, *precisely* because of that dumb and still “noun-ness” by which “the Thing” announces itself, which makes it seem to be the very epitome of indifference (identity), and of the metaphysics of presence, at once demanding, and limiting deconstruction,

both preceding and surviving it. “To the extent that its giving withdrawal is interminable and to the extent that our intentionality still directs itself toward the elusive thing, the concern it evokes rises to the boiling point of an obsession that relentlessly keeps us on the edge because, in the absence of a recognizable figure, the definite-indefinite outlets for channelling it are infinite . . .” (46).

Speaking of infinite outlets, a final remark, or concern, of a broader scale perhaps, might be in place before concluding. It touches on the relation between content and form, perhaps not only in Marder’s text but in Derrida’s as well. It obviously matters to Marder, as it does to Derrida, to guard things from entrapment in a state of closure and mere repetition. Yet in the obsessive and concerned effort to keep things open (to secure their openness if you will), to hold on to duplicities and undecidables, to keep up with traces and remains—as it were, to “take care” of every-thing—it sometimes comes to seem as if the text, paradoxically, closes itself off or impresses a sense of closure, finally producing or presenting us with a work, or a thing, which is, indeed and undeniably, *undeconstructable* or perfectly auto-deconstructing. Or, should we perhaps say that the thing escapes so virtuously, and so categorically, that it finally becomes *invulnerable*?

Whether this is the case, and whether, if so, it is a merit or a flaw; whether the book’s provocation is successful in “keeping us on the edge,” and successful in what way (provoking what sentiment, what attunement, and what response)—I will leave these questions for the reader of this remarkable book to decide on.