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0521405394 - Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot: Sources of Derrida's Notion and Practice of Literature - Timothy Clark

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Jacques Derrida is undoubtedly one of the foremost figures in the development of twentieth-century literary theory. The school of 'deconstruction' that has grown out of his work has been either absorbed into the corpus of modern literary theory, or more recently criticised for its departures from the original texts of Derrida in whose name it is practised. Timothy Clark's innovative book traces instead sources of Derrida's practice of 'literature' as a form of philosophical thinking in the work of Heidegger and Blanchot. It offers a welcome stylistic clarity in a field beleaguered by its philosophical and linguistic difficulty.

Clark gives close readings of key texts including Heidegger's *Conversation on a Country Path*, Blanchot's *L'attente l'oubli*, and Derrida's *Pas* and *Signsponge*, and widens the scope of his discussion of philosophical cultivations of 'literary' forms to include in addition the issues of creativity, influence and responsibility and the work of Lyotard and Levinas.

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Sources of Derrida's notion and practice of literature

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For Joel and for Georgia

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The intellectual debate that continues to surround the term 'deconstruction' has now become broadly divided into two camps. On the one side we see deconstructive readings absorbed easily into introductions and anthologies of critical or literary theory. 'Deconstruction' is one package amongst others in an increasingly less controversial field. On the other hand the past five years have seen a series of books which forcefully argue that what often passes as 'deconstruction' bears little relation to those texts of Jacques Derrida in whose name it is often given. These studies proceed to give variously oriented readings of Derrida's work in its relation to, for example, Hegel, Heidegger or Freud. In fact, 'Derrida studies' has become an elusive sub-discipline practised by a small group of thinkers in which radical claims about literature, philosophy and psychoanalysis often seem undercut by the sheer difficulty and erudition needed to follow the progress of the arguments. The result, for the reader, is an increasing sense of two things: (a) of the proportional relationship between difficulty and a feeling of arbitrariness and, correspondingly, (b) a certain amount of dullness. 'Derrida studies' seem in increasing danger of becoming an arcane minority interest located somewhere between French studies and a sort of literary-history of philosophy.

When writing on texts in which the very possibility of meta-language is a vexed issue, the mode of one's own study itself becomes of importance. It is well known that terms such as 'clarity' or 'lucidity' are metaphors that too easily mask prejudice. However, to cultivate maximum accessibility can also, I believe, give one's writing a maximum openness or even

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vulnerability; hence it may become one way in which a text of this sort can aim to be responsible. The earlier sections of the first three chapters are written at a pace designed to make them readable by relative newcomers to the field and to prepare them for the more involved issues of later sections. The issue throughout is why the literary work of art assumes such lively importance in the work of Heidegger, Blanchot and Derrida, three thinkers who form, to a qualified degree, a distinct community of meditation. Indeed, an odd point to have emerged recently is that those essays by Derrida that concern the literary text are quite different from the better-known deconstructions of philosophical thinkers. It is in attempting to trace the nature and rationale of this difference that this essay tracks Derrida's neologism, *littérature*, from the work, almost exclusively, of Heidegger and Blanchot.

What is at stake in these texts, I believe, is nothing less than an attempt to follow through new and previously elided forms of *coherence* in argument and thought (other than and inherent in logical coherence) as they impose their own emergent necessity in certain texts.

All translations not otherwise acknowledged are my own.

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[More information](#)*Abbreviations*

Heidegger

- BT* *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980
- Conversation* 'Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking' in *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund. New York, N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1966, pp. 58–90
- N, I* *Nietzsche: Vol. One: The Will to Power as Art*, trans. David Farrell Krell. London: Routledge, 1981
- N, IV* *Nietzsche: Vol. Four: Nihilism*, trans. Frank A. Capuzzi. New York, N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1982
- WL* *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz. San Francisco, Calif.: Harper & Row, 1971
- PLT* *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York, N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1971
- WT* *What is Called Thinking*, trans. J. Glenn Gray. New York, N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1968

Blanchot

- L'ao* *L'attente l'oubli*, Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1963
- EI* *L'entretien infini*, Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1969
- LV* *Le livre à venir*, Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1959
- PF* *La part du feu*, Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1949
- Le pas* *Le pas au-delà*, Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1973

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- xiv *Abbreviations*
- SL* *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln, Nebr. and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982
- SS* *The Siren's Song: Selected Essays by Maurice Blanchot*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch, ed. Gabriel Josipovici, Sussex: Harvester, 1982

Derrida

- Diss* *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press and London: Athlone Press, 1981
- Gr* *Of Grammatology*, trans. G.C. Spivak. Baltimore, Md., and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974
- Fh* *Les fins de l'homme; à partir du travail de Jacques Derrida*. Paris: Editions Galilée, 1981
- LG* 'The Law of Genre', trans. Avital Ronell. *Glyph* 7 (1980), pp. 202–32
- LO* 'Living On', trans. James Hulbert, in Harold Bloom *et al.*, *Deconstruction and Criticism*. London: Routledge, 1979, pp. 75–176
- MP* *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass. Chicago, Ill. University of Chicago Press and Sussex: Harvester, 1982
- P* *Parages*. Paris: Editions Galilée, 1986
- RM* 'The Retrait of Metaphor', trans. F. Gasdner *et al.*, *Enclitic* 2, 2 (1978)
- S* *Signsponge*, trans. Richard Rand. New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1984
- Sh* 'Schibboleth', trans. Joshua Wilner, in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Stanley Budick and Geoffrey Hartman. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986
- WD* *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1978

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Levinas

- TI* *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans.
Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne Uni-
versity Press, 1969
- OBBE* *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans.
Alphonso Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff,
1981