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Title: Review of *An Event, Perhaps: A Biography of Jacques Derrida* (London and New York: Verso, 2020). 312pp. Hardback. ISBN: 978-1-78873-280-2 by Peter Salmon.

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Section: Reviews

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Review of *An Event, Perhaps: A Biography of Jacques Derrida* (London and New York: Verso, 2020). 312pp. Hardback. ISBN: 978-1-78873-280-2 by Peter Salmon.

It is reasonable to doubt the obvious need for another life story of Jacques Derrida, after Benoît Peeters so comprehensively charted the philosopher's life and career in his biography of 2010. What is more, Edward Baring has given us a surely definitive account of the intellectual history of Derrida's early years (*The Young Derrida and French Philosophy, 1945-1968*), and Marc Redfield has plotted, in a hugely impressive book, the American chapter of deconstruction's career through academic life (*Theory at Yale: The Strange Case of Deconstruction in America*). In another vein, one might wonder if an attempt to popularize Derrida anew, which is how Verso see this book, realistically has legs. As is the fashion with philosophers' biographies, the dust-jacket précis earnestly promises that the volume will reveal Derrida to be 'a deeply humane and urgent thinker for our times [...] a philosopher whose influence over the way we think will continue long into the twenty-first century.' But frankly, this is a hard sell. The subtlety of Derrida's work, and its typical operation in the context of painstaking readings of other complex philosophical, and sometimes literary, material, make him an awkward fit with a milieu of humanities research obsessed with specious claims of novelty. The absence of a declarative focal point, or – if you like – 'transcendental signifier' around which his philosophical project could be said to cohere (other than the idea that such principles of coherence are never quite what they seem) makes Derrida singularly resistant to accurate co-option by any faction of the intersectional culture wars which currently embarrass liberal arts discourse. In the language of pop culture journalism, Derrida is a philosopher's philosopher, and in all likelihood that is what he will remain.

It is to Peter Salmon's great credit, then, that his *An Event, Perhaps: A Biography of Jacques Derrida* is not just a welcome addition to the literature on Derrida, but a hugely significant one, especially in terms of Derrida pedagogy. Salmon has written a biographical essay on Derrida that can be read in a handful of sittings, which both will do a successful job of giving new readers a clear and sophisticated overview of the main beats of his oeuvre, and clarify for more experienced readers of parts of Derrida's formidable corpus the overall scope and trajectory of the thing.

Leaning avowedly on Peeters and Baring, Salmon confines himself to the pertinent biographical skeleton, of which the major component is the young Derrida's experience, as an Algerian Jew, buffeted by the twin messianisms of Catholicism and communism in 1950s and 1960s Paris. Salmon describes a junior philosopher fascinated by Husserl in an era which was frantically and vaingloriously trying to revivify a certain Marxism – a young man preoccupied by the rhetorical procedure of phenomenology at a time when Althusser and company were convincing themselves that they had rendered obsolete the entire prehistory of thought (the recent publication of Derrida's *Théorie et pratique* seminar from the École normale supérieure in 1975-76 reveals Derrida's abiding fascination with these themes). Salmon's account, while not unearthing anything of biographical import which cannot already be found in Peeters's text, does underscore some interesting and less obvious avenues, such as the suggestion of a substantial distrust of Husserlian antecognition shared by, and kickstarting the philosophical

careers of, both Derrida and Tran Duc Thao (50-51). The overall image of Derrida that Salmon wants to promote is that of a phenomenologist. His early engagements with Husserl, on the one hand, and structuralism (anthropological and literary) on the other, are depicted as attempts to outflank the former's phenomenology, and to show how phenomenology outflanks the latter and reveals its project's latent metaphysics (111).

A strength of the book is Salmon's expert paraphrasis of often convoluted philosophical presentation and language (especially Rousseau, Husserl, Lévinas, structuralism in various guises – and Derrida's readings of these in his own work). *An Event, Perhaps* typically proceeds via the interrelation of short biographical episodes with lucid synopses of the work of Derrida's many philosophical touchstones, arguing for these latter's mutual complementation, in the Derridean project, in the manner of a jigsaw. The outcome is sometimes a little too neat, and it is important not to confuse these potted *Gestalts* with the frequently messy manner in which Derrida encountered his philosophical antecedents and peers, but on the whole it is an effective and persuasive structural decision, if a little convenient in its fusion of chronological periods in Derrida's life with thematic fixations in his work. Roughly the first half of the book is largely given over to these commentaries, interspersed with pertinent biographical episodes; the second half evens out the proportions somewhat, with Derrida's later material sketched in briefer outline and the biographical material included at greater length and frequency. That said, *An Event, Perhaps* is only *perhaps* a biography of Jacques Derrida. Derrida is in Algeria, then France, then the USA. He has a child; the child is suddenly four years old and getting in the way of Derrida's completion of *La voix et le phénomène*. He marries young; of the marriage we hear little. The life is glimpsed in Salmon's brief pauses between elegant explication, a kind of negative of all the writing, writing about writing, and so on. It's not quite 'He was born, he thought, he died,' but it's not far off.

Salmon is not a Derridean in the strict sense, and his book sustains a lightness of tone through its self-consciously outside perspective vis-à-vis the Derrida Industry. The po-faced ruminations on hyperbolic ethics which have characterized other attempts to argue for his mainstream pertinence (while defanging such an ethics through uncritical presumptions of a leftist consensus) are absent here, for example. There is a self-reflexivity to Salmon's style which is deft more often than not – 'I worry at this moment that I have not written enough about Heidegger in the opening chapters' (93) – and recalls Jonathan Coe's excellent biography of B. S. Johnson, *Like a Fiery Elephant*. Some, however, may bristle at Salmon's occasional concessions to journalese ('*Of Grammatology* is a gloriously bonkers book' (127)).

Salmon does not seek to mollify the less palatable aspects of the Derrida story (relatively small in number though they be), and is appealingly brusque in his dismissals of Derrida's self-parodic defences of Paul de Man in *Critical Inquiry*: 'The rest of Derrida's response displayed precisely the sort of relativism and moral slipperiness of which deconstruction often stood accused' (221). The prolix handwringing over de Man's wartime journalism by a number of his peers was unedifying then, and remains so; its fundamental basis in double standards would anticipate at least one more recent scandal among deconstruction's contemporary legateses. Perhaps Salmon's most overt interpretive choice in his book is explicitly to link Derrida's 'turn' – of the late 1980s – 'simultaneously political, ethical and juridical (and indeed theological)' (229) – to the damage wrought, with varying levels of severity, by the Althusser, de Man and Heidegger episodes. A debatable analysis – a bit too much of a 'reverse-Heidegger' – but argued persuasively enough.

The penultimate chapter of Salmon's book begins with a discussion of Derrida's relation-

ships to religion and theology, and finishes up talking about Derrida's spectral influence on contemporary electronic musicians such as Burial and the Caretaker (via, appropriately, the quasi-concept of 'hantologie'). The chapter is at once incongruous – Salmon elsewhere tacks much more closely to his stated subject – and also emblematic, as what appeals about Derrida to Salmon is that proximity to the left field that, for many readers and writers, this philosopher maintained throughout his prolific body of work. This is Salmon's book: sometimes a little weird, certainly untimely, and a generous and learned intellectual achievement.

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