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The Politics of Rereading



## Introduction: Rereading, Re-turning and the Quest of the Political

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# Introduction: Rereading, Re-turning and the Quest of the Political

Mata Dimakopoulou & Mina Karavanta

The crossings between literary theory and criticism, cultural critique, and philosophical thought assumed radically new guises in the wake of poststructuralist discourses in the 1960s. Against the backdrop of the shift of emphasis from the value attached to works and authors to the singularities and multiplicities of readings and readers, the categories of text, language and narrative came to be seen as the structures and processes through which culture, history, and society—the contingent world of the praxis of life even—are mediated. Text and reading soon became malleable categories with which to approach any one form and area of cultural production and historical experience.

The politics of reading that emerged from the critical discourses of poststructuralism transgressed the borders of literary criticism and philological analysis to become central in the radical critique of the project of the Enlightenment as bearing and legitimizing western hegemonic discourses. The question and the demand of and for reading and the consequent imperative to read *otherwise* by engaging non-western and non-eurocentric discourses got crucially entwined with the critique of the epistemological and ontological essentialism that defined the metaphysical foundations of western history and philosophy. Destabilizing the boundaries of disciplines and methodologies in the humanities, and questioning cultural and social boundaries, the work of deconstruction, Marxist critique, new historicism, psychoanalytic criticism, feminist discourses, gender and cultural studies, and postcolonial historiography and critique pressed issues about who reads, who constructs, validates and legitimizes meaning, and how reading unveils and undoes structures of power and domination.

Reading as such a political and not merely philological praxis currently appears to be under serious scrutiny. In his last book *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, Edward Said, one of the most important critics who probed into the politics of reading both in *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism* and provoked new critical affiliations between texts and worlds, attacks poststructuralist discourses in order to resuscitate humanism from their remains. Taking the position that poststructuralist critique has systematically and persistently deconstructed the discourses in which humanism was embedded, he proposes that the field of the humanities reorient itself to "its rightful concern with the critical investigation of values, history, and freedom" (14) and consciously defy the "fashionability of newly relevant fields like postcolonialism, ethnic studies, cultural studies, and the like" (14). Against what he calls the poststructuralist production of a "whole factory of word-spinning and insouciant specialities" (14), Said offers the systematic praxis of "attentive reading" (64) that can instead bind the philological exercise of close reading with the question of the political.<sup>1</sup> Critical of the heritage of poststructuralist critique and impatient with its eternal deferral to respond to the questions that emerge in the terrain of politics, Said advocates a praxis of reading that caters both to the aesthetic as well as the secular registers and contingencies of texts. For Said, the humanities constitute the field where such a politics of reading can be practiced in the name of a humanism that is still viable and salvageable despite and against the systematic critique that the concept and its practices have received in the wake of poststructuralism:

I believed then, and still believe, that it is possible *to be critical of humanism in the name of humanism* and that, schooled in its abuses by the experience of Eurocentrism and empire, one could fashion a different kind of humanism that was cosmopolitan and text-and-language-bound in ways that absorbed the great lessons of the past, say, Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer and more recently from Richard Poirier, and still remain attuned to the emergent voices and currents of the present, many of them exilic, extraterritorial, and unhoused, as well *uniquely American*. (10-11; emphasis added)

This last turning point reveals the problematic of a critique whose intention to resuscitate a name, the name of humanism, overwrites the political blunders of the practices that the name has legitimized. In other words, how can one be "critical of humanism in the name of humanism" without a systematic and persistent critique that simultaneously reveals humanism's "blind spots"?<sup>2</sup> Can the coming of a new kind of critique be announced on a ground cleared of all the traces, remains and even ruins of the past, and ensured simply by the promise of a more philologically oriented reading detoxicated by the enchantments of poststructuralist discourses? If yes, how can this critique protect itself from a politics of forgetting that can endanger the very process of a reading praxis that promises to excavate the new in the old and envision the future in the present? And if not, how can a return to that past of critical discourses be something more than just a reading against the grain? In his effort to respond to these

questions and the complexity of proposing a politics of reading that returns to the question of the human in the name of a humanism that, as the sole property of the field of the humanities, needs to be redeemed and saved no matter what, Said recommends that this politics of reading be contrapuntal.<sup>3</sup> Contrapuntal reading can bring together different, often radically oppositional realities that would otherwise remain isolated from each other, albeit always already intertwined.<sup>4</sup> This praxis of reading that imagines the world otherwise first through the reconstellation of texts and then through the meticulous, caring and attentive analysis of the worlds that they invoke and represent is a praxis that is attentive to the political. Following Jacques Derrida's definition of the political in *Politics of Friendship*, we argue that the political is not the terrain of politics as practiced and organized by the state but the praxis of the political as a "yet-to-come" that will best answer and cater to the complex demands of the present in the name of the future of constituencies and their territories. In the West, politics attends to the organization of the present in the name of the past, namely, the formed nation and its coherent community often dreamt as a homogenized fraternity; in a world growing in complexity,<sup>5</sup> the political attends to the question of the future in the present by critically thinking through the birth and proliferation of new communities produced by the incalculable movement and migratory flows of constituencies, labor and capital in the thick network of globalization. It is no other but Said who reminds us of the imperative question of the political in view of the global age:

We can perceive this truth on the political map of the contemporary world. For surely it is one of the unhappiest characteristics of the age to have produced more refugees, migrants, displaced persons, and exiles than ever before in history, most of them as an accompaniment to and, ironically enough, as afterthoughts of great post-colonial and imperial conflicts. As the struggle for independence produced new states and new boundaries, it also produced homeless wanderers, nomads, and vagrants, unassimilated to the emerging structures of institutional power, rejected by the established order for their intransigence and obdurate rebelliousness. And insofar as these people exist between the old and the new, between the old empire and the new state, their condition articulates the tensions, irresolutions, and contradictions in the overlapping territories shown on the cultural map of imperialism. (*Culture and Imperialism* 332)

The first issue of *Synthesis* emerges in response to this need to envision the political "on the map of the contemporary world" through the praxis of rereading that neither announces the coming of a new and pure reading nor simply advocates a politics of reading against the grain. Recognizing a growing impatience with the attachment of discourses informed by poststructuralism to the deferral of the question of the political, namely, with the systematic postponement of a response that would be more directly and responsibly addressing the political exigencies of the present, this special issue contemplates the act of rereading as a political act, which is necessarily both a revisionist and an envisioning effort. As such, it genealogically questions the past and critically responds to the needs of a present that is no longer one but is constantly growing in complexity as the world is becoming more and more "unevenly" connected.<sup>6</sup> This act of return to the past that inheres in the repetitive but also plural act of reading in the present is also a turn to this "uneven now" shared by those newly emergent constituencies and realities temporarily excluded from both present and future and constituted by the vision of a future dreamt otherwise and, as Jacques Derrida would put it, "yet-to-come."

In being a return act, rereading promises what R. Radhakrishnan calls a "revisionism", an act of counter-memory that is an affirmation of the present rather than a "reading against the grain" that returns to correct the past (45).<sup>7</sup> In "call[ing] into question the very category of history" (Radhakrishnan 45), the act of rereading reveals two "coeval temporalities": that of the past not as monument but as narration, interpretation, and event relived and experienced in the present; and that of the present as a process of becoming and fluctuation. As a politics, this act of rereading proposes what Santiago Colás calls "an ethics of close reading" (172-73). In response to the challenge to know realities and ontologies that are intrinsically impenetrable and yet related to us in yet-unknown ways, close reading is more than a philological exercise. It rather is a "cultivation of unknowing relating" (173), an attempt to write the "impenetrability of things and so preserve a zone of unknowing relating" (174). Close reading, therefore, is not only a philological exercise attentive to the form of the text, in other words, a reborn New Criticism or a re-formalism; it is a praxis connected with what Colás, in his reading of Martin Heidegger and Giorgio Agamben, defines as "theory" and "contemplation" (192). For Colás, reading as a theoretical praxis reads the text as "swatch in the fabric of the world, which is not necessarily (or only) the world in which it was produced but rather also the world in which it is

being made to circulate today" (193). Colás' "ethics of close reading" bears a crucial affinity with Said's concept of secular criticism that, unlike his return to philology, uses an interdisciplinary theoretical model to articulate and analyze the complex affiliations between worlds and texts. Both are acts of rereading that rely on the indissoluble connections between texts and the world as it was, has been and is, connections that reveal the unevenness and plurality of the world; the world may be shared as one but is lived as many, and texts are there to testify to the plurality and the incommensurability of the experiences of this "uneven" world.

Rereading, therefore, is not just an act of reading against the grain, to remember Radhakrishnan—but an open-ending act of rethinking the past in the present in order to imagine the present in more democratic ways and envision the future otherwise. While it has been argued that deconstructive readings bring about the end of philological reading, despite deconstruction's systematic use of the rhetorical practices of philology, rereading does not abide by an either-or logic and instead invites an interdisciplinary and intercultural politics. The politics of rereading is attentive to close readings that disclose the multiple, contrapuntal, oppositional and differential connections and encounters between texts and world(s) and does not shy away from engaging and even inventing im-possible connections between texts and texts, texts and worlds, and the world and worlds. Such an interdisciplinary and intercultural politics of rereading sustains the human subject's "capacity to think historically, to think the present as an open-ended process emerging in continuity and discontinuity with the past (or pasts) and evolving, again with continuity and discontinuity, into the present (or presents)" (Colás 206).

The essays in the inaugural issue of *Synthesis* engage with the conditions of possibility for acts of reading and propose a critical rescuing of the practice of reading as an act of responsibility and as an act of resistance. The authors address both the subject and the object of reading, and critically engage the tensions, complementarities, reversals and slippages of texts and events. By pursuing the question of how reading runs the risk of being arrested, aborted, silenced or co-opted, from within distinct yet interconnected theoretical contexts and discourses, all authors redeem the radicalizing potential of the act of reading, before a growing uneasiness towards what has been perceived as the exhaustion of poststructuralism and deconstructive critique;<sup>8</sup> namely, the uses and abuses of the notion of textuality, indeterminacy and undecidability; the emphasis on the work of language and the proliferation of meaning and the abuse of Derridean *différance* as inconclusive deferral; a growing concern over the political efficacy and the ethical implications of the critical attention to the work of the signifier and the concurrent critique of the repressive, immobilizing force of the signified.

In "Modalities of Death and the Thought of Life: The Politics of Metaphoricity in Julia Kristeva and Jacques Derrida," Maria Margaroni performs a revisionist and envisioning return to the deconstructive critique of origin and metaphysical closure, by setting in dialogue, or rather in counterpoint, Jacques Derrida's and Julia Kristeva's discrete yet interconnected "politics of metaphoricity." Derrida and Kristeva wrest metaphor from the "effect of doubling" that erases difference in a metaphysical teleological economy of exchange, equivalence and sameness, and re-turn to a "more archaic motility" of the metaphor. Margaroni demonstrates how the two thinkers mobilize the "reversive force" at work in metaphoricity. Derrida predicates metaphor on the absence of origin while Kristeva redeems the movement towards the other: in Derrida, metaphoricity defers the death of being in a movement which, akin to Maurice Blanchot's dying, ultimately suspends its end in both senses of the word, rather than being mobilized by lack; in Kristeva, metaphoricity sustains the other and the self in a state of suspension where identity would mean an end haunted by death. Kristeva supplements the gift of death with the generosity of *care-full* writing and reading (with) the other, while in Derrida, metaphoricity is a locus of loss through the act of naming being *otherwise*. Margaroni salvages *différance* not only as the *deferral* of metaphysical closure but rather as an active work of resistance against subsuming the other to the politics of the same.

In "The Impossibility of Reading in the Information Age: Warnings of Militarality Spoken in Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*," Robert Marzec contemplates the timeliness of the politics of

rereading and the need to salvage the worldliness of texts by pressing the imperative to preserve reading as a fundamentally historical and political act, as a token of existence even, at a juncture where the very possibility of reading seems to be declining. Marzec co-articulates the proliferation of sound bites, a phenomenon that he posits as an avatar of the unprecedented expansion of communication in postmodernity; the expansion of the coercive ideology of militariality; and, Salman Rushdie's narrativizing the waning of narrative and the loss of the ability to read reflectively. Marzec reads the decline of reflective experiences in connection to what he diagnoses as a recent "ontological transformation" of the "essence of textuality" within the information age, whereby the sound bites displace and colonize textuality through manipulative effects that are divorced from the content that the sound bite may contain, in this way altering the consciousness of the materiality and the worldly texture of texts. Reading Rushdie's novel against the backdrop of the "militariality" of the age of the sound bite, Marzec envisions writing as a process that salvages the experience of reading as the site of a reflective—rather than reflexive—opening out onto heterogeneity.

Christina Dokou re-turns and reflects on the im/possibility of writing and reading in postmodernism's wake by revisiting the simultaneous articulation of feminism and deconstruction in her reading of "postfeminist mosaics" in Jamie Pachino's *Theodora: An Unauthorized Biography*. Dramatizing the im/possibilities of both deconstructive and feminist textual strategies, as Dokou critically argues, Pachino's play performs a re-turn to the oppositional tactics of much postmodernist writing: the movement of the signifier, emancipatory and resistant as it might have been, is equally prey to repressive mis/appropriations and to an agonizing flight away from, and fight against the fixity of a lost truth or origin. Dokou explores how repressive patriarchal narratives inscribe themselves on a signifier that resists fixity, yet equally bears the trauma of the impossibility to recover authenticity, and the in/ability to preserve the space and the trace that cannot be assimilated within those narratives. As Rushdie's "Moor" is caught up in the repressive mechanisms of a sound bite culture, Pachino's "Theodora" is caught up in the persistence of patriarchal binarisms: by turning to texts that lay bare the predicament of reading, Dokou and Marzec contemplate reading as a reciprocal and transitive act, against the ideological disempowerment of both and/or either the subject and the object of reading.

While Dokou and Marzec reenvision reading and writing by respectively confronting repressive and repetitive processes of rewriting and the coercive manipulation of dissemination, Georgia Axiotou in "Towards a 'Theatre of Impossible Forgiveness'" reflects on Ama Ata Aidoo's critical questioning of the imperative to re-turn to the reading and the writing of the past within the present and the playwright's attentive exploration of the coeval recovery of remembering and forgetting the silent, yet not silenced, histories of slavery in postcolonial contexts. In Ama Ata Aidoo's play *The Dilemma of the Ghost*, silence emerges as both the token of repression and the space of the re-turn of the event and the subject's experience of history. Axiotou reads this silence in Aidoo's play as a trope that operates a movement similar to the modality of death in Kristeva and Derrida and may be seen as bearing the potentiality of metaphoricity: telling is a cure that resists forgetting and holds back the subject from becoming absorbed in a neutralizing unificatory narrative that elides heterogeneity. In her caring analysis of the role of the specter, Axiotou demonstrates how the haunting of the specter unconceals the demand of reading and representing the trauma and the need for a continuing and persistent performance of what has been unsaid and is yet to be told. This "unsaying" renders the trauma open to reading and interpretation, instead of sealing and, thereby, forgetting it as read once and for all. As silenced specters get entwined with the specter of silence, Axiotou articulates a crucial inflection of the ethical responsibility of the politics of rereading in a postcolonial community: the trauma of history needs to be sustained in its "readability" that, pursued by a politics of rereading, will resist the community's monumentalizing and forgetting the traumatic events whose singularity will thus be shielded from the politics and policies of assimilation.

In her compelling reading of Jan Schmidt's 1966 *Late August at the Hotel Ozone*, Fran Bartkowski in "Signs of Life: Questions of Survival" traces how the film is resonant with the urgencies and the imperatives that informed the birth of the radical feminisms of the late 1960s and the not-yet, the imminent moment of the Prague Spring. While Dokou engages with the persistent life of signs, and

Marzec looks for "signs of life" and possibilities of reading in a context taken over by a repressive textuality, Bartkowski explores how reading and telling are bound up with the predicament of an existence that is severed from "any grid of the social" in the post-apocalyptic dystopia of Schmidt's film. Bound up with instances of violence in Schmidt's dystopia, reading is nonetheless the only token of meaningful life, an act of opening out that bears both a destructive and a redemptive force.

Finally, in "Reading Contrapuntally, Living in the Present," the question of reading is intertwined with the question of the political. R. Radhakrishnan, in dialogue with Mina Karavanta, reflects on the need for critique and reframes the re-turn to the text within the timely re-turn to the human and contingent contexts of texts. Responding to Karavanta's question regarding the theory-end narratives—the end of history, the end of postcolonial studies—Radhakrishnan addresses the excess and much debated end of theory and analyzes the challenge that postcolonial theory confronts in the present by delving into the multiple registers of *postality*. Marking the terrain of postcolonial studies as a problematic field constituted by the ongoing and irresolvable conflict between the post as event and narrative, Radhakrishnan articulates some of the various accountabilities of the term *post* in and outside the field of postcolonial studies. To respond to the question of the politics of reading and the praxis that critique is called forth to live up to, Radhakrishnan, taking off from Said's analysis of contrapuntal reading, offers a beautiful reading of the counterpoint. By contemplating the counterpoint not only as an aesthetic figure or a structurally constituent element inherent in only certain texts, he proposes that a contrapuntal reading that brings together previously untried affiliations and often oppositional realities can provoke the manifestation of the counterpoint as a shared territory where the possibility of the impossible is manifested.

The notion of the re-turn within and towards the act of reading is tantamount to re-imagining politics as a shared participatory space, a space of the "conjunctural coevalness" of the historicity of the present and the temporality of history (Radhakrishnan), a space of "democratic criticism" (Edward Said).<sup>9</sup> The counterpoint emerges as a trope that reinscribes worldliness in the reflective experiences of writing and reading and positions texts, their secular contexts and human, albeit not always constituted, constituencies in re-constellations that resist essentializing humanism. These re-constellations of texts, worlds, events, and constituencies require a politics of rereading that re-turns to the plural present to disclose the in-betweens where neither the human contingent subjects nor the objects of reading and writing get immobilized in transcendent dualities or positions of mastery. The counterpoint emerges as a trope of immanence that operates as a doubly phenomenological and historicist perspective on reading texts. The re-turn that is at stake in the political praxis of rereading involves the historicity of the reflective moment and its incommensurability and enmeshment within the text: it is this re-turn that opens onto envisioning the present *otherwise*, a re-turn akin to what Margaroni, in her re-turn to Kristeva and Derrida, terms the *other* metaphor, the *poetic* one. The politics of rereading is ultimately a re-turn that salvages and sustains the ontological question against a politics of identity that often produces antagonism and therefore resists the possibility of caring readings.

The politics of rereading reframes and reactivates deconstructive critique as a reflective practice within the present<sup>10</sup> and engages the humaneness of deconstruction and the responsibility towards the other as a critical and anti-essentialist human gesture seething with risk;<sup>11</sup> the ethics of deconstruction, crucial in a critical postmodernism of resistance, and the historicizing, anti-essentialist strains within the heritage of humanism are not merely residual in acts of pitting the critique of humanism against the salvaging of the human but rather contrapuntally active and present in the politics of rereading. The politics of rereading is not a mere act of looking back and does not simply break away from the work of deconstructive and genealogical critiques; instead it preserves the transformative potential of reading. The politics of rereading points beyond the dichotomy between readings deemed too theoretical or too political and between readings that are deemed not theoretical or not political enough. Texts are encountered as complex instances of the present where texts, contexts and readings intersect. The articles brought together in the first issue of *Synthesis* encounter reading as a gift that opens to the world where texts are sites of opposition, revision, reconciliation and imagining without subsuming alterity to constricting representations, without subsuming "unknowing" to fixed interpretive modalities. Rereading is a revisionism of and within a present that

is doubly singular and irreducible to the general but also unevenly shared and collective. The politics of rereading reenvisions a dual commitment to the world and the text without compromising the heritage of poststructuralism and by historicizing and inscribing the human subject in the present that needs to be reconceptualized beyond the terms of the discredited universality of western humanism. The politics of rereading promises to challenge the hegemonic discourses of modernity, acknowledges the postmodernist tactics of resistance, and reconstellates humanism as a critical act of responsibility that genealogically turns to the past in order to re-turn to a plural and uneven present. A present yet to become *ours*, or to follow Derrida here, a present "yet-to-come."

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<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of this question and its crucial differentiation from politics as practiced in the public realm, see Hannah Arendt's *The Promise of Politics* and Jacques Derrida's *Politics of Friendship*.

<sup>2</sup> See the analysis of this concept in relation to what Althusser calls the "field of the problematic" in Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar's *Reading Capital*.

<sup>3</sup> For a critical reading of what can be perceived to be Said's reductive return to humanism, see William V. Spanos' "Edward Said and the Poststructuralists: Introduction" and R.Radhakrishnan's "Edward Said's Literary Humanism."

[4] See Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*. For a critical reading of Said's politics of contrapuntal reading in the context of his lifelong commitment to the praxis of secular criticism, see Aamir R.Mufti's "Critical Secularism: A Reintroduction for Perilous Times."

<sup>5</sup> Liana Borghi offers an analysis of the theoretical and pedagogical implications of this term in *ReSisters in Conversation: Representation, Responsibility, Complexity, Pedagogy*.

<sup>6</sup> For an attentive and envisioning reading of the concept of unevenness, see R.Radhakrishnan's *Theory in an Uneven World*.

<sup>7</sup> See R.Radhakrishnan's "Revisionism and the Subject of History" in *History, the Human and the World Between*.

<sup>8</sup> Gregory Ulmer articulates the poststructuralist critique of representation in "The Object of Post-Criticism" in a volume that mapped postmodernism and the tactics of resistance of much postmodernist art. See Hal Foster (ed.) *Postmodern Culture*.

<sup>9</sup> See R.Radhakrishnan's "Revisionism and the Subject of History" (from *History, the Human and the World Between*) and Edward Said's "Humanism's Sphere" and "The Changing Bases of Humanistic Study and Practice" (from *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*).

<sup>10</sup> Derek Attridge, in his Introduction to Jacques Derrida's *Acts of Literature*, warns against "misreading" deconstruction as a critical praxis that elides the historical and the social in a reflexive, self-referential process:

For Derrida the literary text is not, therefore, a verbal icon or a hermetically sealed space; it is not the site of a rich plenitude of meaning but rather a kind of emptying-out of meaning that remains potentially meaningful; it does not possess a core of uniqueness that survives mutability, but rather a repeatable singularity that depends on an openness to new contexts and therefore on its difference each time it is repeated (16).

<sup>11</sup> Here we invoke Maurice Blanchot's powerful and affective reading of risk and responsibility in *The Writing of the Disaster*.

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