

Aleksander Kopka, *A Life Interrupted: The Politics and Ethics of Mourning in the Work of Jacques Derrida*, PhD

Aleksander Kopka has written a remarkable thesis. He provides an admirably wide-ranging account of the work of Jacques Derrida in relation to the concept and experience of mourning, from *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy* (1953-4) and the *Introduction to Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry* (1962) up to *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (2003), the final seminars published as *The Beast and the Sovereign* (2001-3) and the last recorded interview, 'Learning to Live Finally' (2004). With constant reference to the logic of the trace and the strange portmanteau of 'lifedeath' (with its host of related motifs, including *survivance* or 'living on', 'I mourn therefore I am', spectrality and autoimmunity), Kopka has produced a formidably dense and challenging, meticulous, probing and original study. Furnishing exhaustive discussion of a significant number of Derrida's books, essays and interviews, the project delivers in the process some wonderfully detailed readings of particular passages and moments in Derrida's writing. Above all, it contains many excellent expositions of what Kopka calls 'the beating heart of [Derrida's] thought, i.e. ungovernable mourning' (p.88), via incisive readings of 'Freud and the Scene of Writing', 'Fors', 'To Speculate – on "Freud"', *Mémoires: for Paul de Man, Given Time, Spectres of Marx, Politics of Friendship*, 'Faith and Knowledge' and *The Beast and the Sovereign*. In related close readings of Derrida on Husserl, Freud and Levinas, in particular, Kopka makes a compelling case for acknowledging the centrality of mourning in any critical response to, and understanding of, Derrida's work. While Kopka maintains a scrupulously scholarly and detached tone in the main, it is also evident (as in that phrase about the 'beating heart') that this is a work of passion as well as erudition.

Kopka's general method – which is consistently followed throughout – is to prioritize attention to primary texts, not only Derrida's but also those that Derrida is writing about. This gives the thesis real strengths, both in clarity of focus and in its potential pedagogical usefulness, since it regularly offers the reader in-depth, patient and discerning commentaries on specific passages and arguments that enable a sharper appreciation of what Derrida is doing, as well as of the texts to – or with – which he is doing it. One emerges from a reading of this thesis with a renewed sense of the extraordinary nature of Derrida's oeuvre as well as of the philosophers with whose work he engaged. Given the breadth of Kopka's project, it is not surprising that there are topics or texts omitted or hardly touched on, or aspects of the argument that seem less filled out than others, or directions in which the discussion might have gone but did not go. It is striking, though oddly unremarked, that the shape of the thesis is organized around the chronological trajectory of Derrida's own life or, at least, of his writings. The rationale or effects of this procedure might have warranted further reflection. In his obituarial remarks mourning the death of Sarah Kofman, Derrida alerts us to the seductive but delusive claims of a demand or prayer to 'Transfigure me into a *corpus*', to turn the living into a 'great computerized library of knowledge' (*The Work of Mourning*, 169). Kopka gives some fine attention to the complexities of his title phrase, 'a life interrupted'; but there is perhaps more to be said about the chronological flow of 'a life'

or the linearity and ‘gathering’ of an intellectual or philosophical biography as it implicitly structures the project.

It is also the case that, while Kopka’s focus on primary texts is a significant strength, the reader is left feeling that a fuller engagement with secondary criticism might on occasion have helped to enrich the discussion, variegated the tonalities and proliferate perspectives. There are apposite and illuminating instances of recourse to the work of Geoffrey Bennington, Thomas Dutoit, Michael Naas and Derek Attridge, for example, but in general engagement with the work of other commentators is infrequent. Kopka’s thesis appears at what is at once no doubt a timely and untimely moment: *La Vie la mort. Séminaire 1975-6* is published this year in French and a number of books on or around this topic have also been appearing, including David Wills’s *Inanimation: Theories of Inorganic Life* (2016), Francesco Vitale’s *Biodeconstruction: Jacques Derrida and the Life Sciences* (2018), Michael Naas’s *Plato and the Invention of Life* (2018) and Dawne McCance’s *The Reproduction of Life Death: Derrida’s La vie la mort* (2019). Kopka’s work can hardly be criticized for not taking account of work appearing too late for consideration (this is part of the usual paranoid fate of anyone completing a PhD), but any revised version of the thesis with the aim of publication would need to reckon with this shifting and burgeoning field.

In reading Kopka’s work I felt carried along, rather as one might by a flow of molten lava, but also with a good deal more pleasure than that metaphor might imply. Kopka’s writing has something of a volcanic gradualness, at any rate, both at the level of the chapter or thesis-section and at the level of the individual sentence. Pages and pages can go by without any explicit reference to mourning, but then suddenly (on p.54, for example, or again on p.66 or again on p.113 or again on p.242) it rises up, as if by a kind of deferred action, and we are invited to align everything prior to this in its wake. In similar fashion, where in a conventional context we might hope that a chapter would conclude by recapitulating what has been worked through in the preceding pages, Kopka’s thesis (for example, at the end of Chapter 2, on pp.137-8) abruptly introduces the ostensibly new topics of ‘the secret’ and ‘justice’. This is – as Kopka’s thesis everywhere is – deeply thoughtful (Kopka’s work strikes me as a singular case of what Derrida calls ‘thoughtful or thinking analysis’; ‘une *analyse pensante*’ [*H.C. pour la vie...*, p.90]); but it is not especially *thetic*.

Likewise in terms of the individual sentence. I appreciate that English is not Aleksander Kopka’s first language: the author’s ‘command of English’, as the idiom goes, seems to me generally excellent, and I feel humbled by the fact and grateful to have had a chance to encounter this work ‘in translation’ in this manner. Nonetheless, from a proof-reading or copy-editing perspective (i.e. with my editorial hat on), I have to report that there are innumerable issues with details of language – especially around the use or non-use of the definite and indefinite article (‘the’ and ‘a’ or ‘an’) – and I have annotated my copy of the thesis accordingly. Whether or not we should see Kopka’s prose as an example of what Edward Said called ‘late style’ emerging before its time, there is a density and tendency towards convolutedness or involutedness, complete with expansive parenthetical, digressive and circumlocutory developments and sub-developments, that would have

delighted the narrator of Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Imp of the Perverse'. There is also, for me, some lack of clarity about the justification for the length of certain footnotes or indeed for why certain passages of the text are deemed to be more appropriately in footnotes rather than in the main body of the text (e.g. the long footnote flowing under and across pp.270-2). There are also global inconsistencies, such as the placing of punctuation the wrong side of a parenthetical reference and the use of italics rather than apostrophes ('like this') to designate the titles of essays (i.e. it should be 'Freud and the Scene of Writing', not *Freud and the Scene of Writing*). And then there are more idiosyncratic quirks, such as the various ways in which the author chooses to signify that he has added emphases or remarks (I propose that he make this consistent by simply inserting the clarification of an 'A.K.' at the relevant point), or when he tells the reader to 'go back' to Chapter 2 or Chapter 4 etc, as if reading the thesis were a game of 'Snakes and Ladders' or 'Monopoly': 'as I have discussed earlier, in Chapter 2' or 'see Chapter 4' would be more conventional formulations.

But what a piece of work it is! It took me *ages* to read. But I never went for long without encountering some remarkable and unexpected turn, some compelling digression or haunting parenthetical detail or side-flow, such as the splendid turn to the question of force and mourning apropos Louis Marin (on p.158), or the marvellous exposition of Derrida's meditation on John Donne's lines 'I runne to death, and death meets me as fast, / And all my pleasures are like yesterday' (pp.179-82), or the note about photography and Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* (on p.180), or the elucidation of the 'without' (*sans*) in Blanchot (p.246, n55), or the discussion of community and constitutive 'loss' in Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* (p.258), or the explosion of examples of victims of 'military affairs' (on p.335). For all its typographical ruggedness, its thetic unconventionality and the apparent narrowness of the channeling of its arguments, I see a good case for considering the thesis worthy of a distinction.

Sometimes the footnotes provide important acknowledgements of what is deemed to fall outside the scope of the author's concerns. In particular here I would note the question of the so-called 'question of the animal' (p.244, n53) and questions of 'sexual or gender difference' (p.335, n116), including, I would add, queer theory (let us not forget Derrida's peremptory remark, in the essay entitled 'Justices': 'To be is to be queer' [p.243]). I would very much like to hear what Kopka has to say about these topics that have been effectively cordoned off. I am less confident, perhaps, than he is, that they can be cordoned off. And then it is a crucial dimension of the richness and provocative power of this thesis that I found myself wondering about the elaboration of other questions too. In conclusion, permit me, if I may, to mention just three further examples:

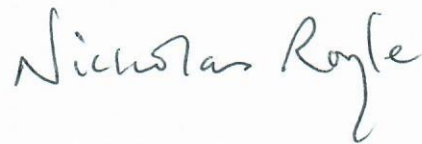
(1) a 'question concerning technology' (as Heidegger might say): what about 'artificial life'? what if the other is an artificial intelligence (see, e.g. around p.273)?

(2) a question about music, and in particular what or how does Kopka think about the relationship between music and mourning? I am thinking here of Derrida's image of dying, sinking slowly in beloved music, in 'Circumfession' (208-9), for example, or the thought-provoking comment he makes in his homage to Paul de Man that 'only music

today seems to me bearable, consonant, able to give some measure of what unites us in the same thought' (*The Work of Mourning*, p.75).

(3) the question of pleasure. I am thinking here of Hélène Cixous's description of Derrida as the 'forever child', and also of his remark that 'Art and laughter, when they go together, do not run counter to suffering, they do not ransom or redeem it, but live off it' (*The Work of Mourning*, p.173). Derrida stresses that 'One should not develop a taste for mourning... [one] must not like it' (*The Work of Mourning*, p.110). At the same time, there is enormous pleasure in Derrida's work, in reading it and in how he reads. As he also says, deconstruction has to do with 'liberating forbidden *jouissance*' (*Acts of Literature*, p.56). Is there a new economy, perhaps even a new politics and ethics of pleasure in Derrida's work?

I would like to ask Aleksander Kopka to say more about these things.



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