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Edward Baring, *The Young Derrida and French Philosophy, 1945-1968*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xi + 326 pp. \$99.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-107-00967-7.

Review by Michael Kelly, University of Southampton.

Jacques Derrida is one of the most influential French thinkers of the post-existentialist generation. His radical critique of dominant categories of thought has inspired considerable reworking of the terms of literary and philosophical discourse, extending into other disciplines in the human sciences, especially linguistics and psychoanalysis. And yet, appearing as a thinker of the margins, Derrida has remained difficult to locate in the debates to which he contributed. He cultivated a determined resistance to the many attempts to pin him down to an affiliation with one or other of the main intellectual movements of his time. He was even more resistant to suggestions that his thought might be ascribed to his personal biography. This resistance to classification was facilitated by his notoriously complex and playful mode of writing, his enigmatic sense of humour, and his mischievous tendency to lay tempting but speculative trails for would-be biographers. For most readers, Derrida's thinking therefore appears decontextualized, and seems to have emerged fully formed in the three major works he published in 1967: *L'Écriture et la différence*, *La Voix et le phénomène*, and *De la grammatologie*.^[1] They established him as a global figure almost overnight, alongside Foucault, Lacan, Althusser and Lévi-Strauss.

The challenge for a historian is to look at the time before the Big Bang of deconstruction without reducing Derrida's work to its presumed origins, whether in its philosophical antecedents, its socio-political context in France or its connection to a personal biography. Intellectual historians must always guard against reductionism of this kind, all the more so when their subject has been such an effective critic of the conceptual weakness of such approaches. Edward Baring rises magnificently to the challenge, exploring the intellectual environment in which Derrida's ideas developed as well as the critical distance that he wove so intricately between his thought and its contexts.

Baring offers a compelling analysis of Derrida's itinerary over twenty years, from the post-war existentialist maelstrom of Sartre's Paris to the structuralist or post-structuralist challenge of the mid-sixties. He begins with an evocation of the virulent debates of the mid-1940s, between existentialists, Catholics and Marxists, who were wrestling to assert themselves as the legitimate standard bearers of the hegemonic humanism of the period. As these debates faded, the 1950s appear as the picking over of the debris of Sartrean existentialism, and an emerging focus on the "death of Man," replacing the "death of God." We are reminded how the intellectual life of post-war Paris functioned as a village, with so much of its activity concentrated in one square mile on the Left Bank, and so many of its leading figures connected by ties of family, friendship or education.

In a village, everyone is somebody, and Derrida was somebody from the start. He came into the village in 1949 as a star pupil from the leading *lycée* in French Algiers, and made his mark at the *lycée* Louis-le-Grand in the preparatory class. From there his *curriculum vitae* is well known. He eventually progressed to the *École normale supérieure*, to a teaching post at the Sorbonne and back in 1964 to the ENS, where he was to remain for the rest of his career in France.

At each step, Derrida was in regular dialogue with influential French thinkers. A very formative mentor was the Catholic personalist Étienne Borne, philosophy teacher at Louis-le-Grand, who encouraged Derrida's early Christian existentialism, inspired by Gabriel Marcel and Simone Weil. Baring suggests that this provided a spiritual thread throughout Derrida's work, even though he abandoned its early expression and often buried transcendental implications deep within his analyses. Baring is particularly firm in identifying a specifically Christian dimension to his thought, as distinct from the Jewish spirituality at which Derrida was later inclined to hint, with a nod to his Jewish family background.

On entering the hothouse of the ENS, Derrida encountered new mentors in the director, Jean Hyppolite, and the secretary, Louis Althusser, both philosophers, though with very different relationships to existentialism, Hegel and Marx. He found himself uncomfortably wedged between two schools of intellectual activism, the communists and the "Tala" Catholics, both of whom were strident in recruiting support. Sympathetic to both, though with reservations, and conscious of Althusser's watchful eye, Derrida managed to chart a careful philosophical course with the aid of Edmund Husserl. The German phenomenologist was familiar in Christian and existentialist circles and beginning to gain acceptance among some Marxists, so provided Derrida with a valuable terrain to explore his developing thought without offending either camp.

After graduating from the ENS, he took up a post in the Sorbonne, a less constraining environment where he met new colleagues and was both enabled and required to explore a much wider range of thinkers, focusing on issues of epistemology. This proved an advantage when he returned to the ENS in 1964 to find it greatly changed and now grappling with the structuralist revolution. There, he made distinguished interventions in several crucial debates, including the forms of discourse in Lacanian psychoanalysis, the modalities of reading in Althusserian Marxism and the critique of logocentric humanism. These interventions developed the distinctive analyses of *différance* and deconstruction for which he became known through his three seminal books of 1967.

Conscious, no doubt, of Derrida's attachment to textuality, Baring brings a powerful combination of archival research and close reading of texts to construct a complex narrative. He is sharply aware of the other studies that have examined Derrida's early life and works from different perspectives, and offers a distinctive account that stays close to the texts and intertexts. Many of his discussions are based on extensive documents from the Derrida papers held at the University of California at Irvine, in major archives in Paris (Archives nationales, CAC, IMEC, ENS, Louis-Le-Grand) and in individual archives (Étienne Borne, Paul Ricoeur). This enables Baring to draw a very fine-grained picture of the intellectual communities to which Derrida belonged and to outline with precision the stages of his developing thought. Hence, some remarkable insights emerge from his feedback on students' written work, from the outlines of his lectures, or from particular pedagogical methods, such as guidance on the structure of written work or intensive training on the handling of oral examinations. Baring offers a startlingly illuminating discussion of the impact of the *agrégation*, which Derrida professed to hate, though it was his primary responsibility to prepare students to sit the competitive examination. The slowly changing curriculum of the state exam had a decisive influence on the texts Derrida read in any given year. The skills tested in written and oral exams also shaped the reading strategies and analytical approaches he adopted, and passed on to his students.

As Baring points out, his book does not attempt to offer a comprehensive study of the intellectual climate of the period. However, he does offer an impressive study of Derrida's own intellectual hinterland. Setting the stage for his formative postwar years, Baring starts from Sartre's famous and contested lecture on Existentialism and Humanism, and in so doing reawakens neglected debates, especially among the Catholic and communist intellectuals. He gives detailed accounts of books and articles now largely forgotten, but convincingly knits them into the narrative of Derrida's evolution. Though he naturally focuses on the issues around Husserl, Heidegger, and phenomenology, he shows a

confident grasp of a number of other related areas, including Christian existentialist thought, psychoanalysis and the theory of mathematics.

One of the most valuable aspects of the book is the virtuoso analysis of Derrida's writings, from his early essays as a student through to his mature works of the mid-sixties. Baring is always sensitive to the debates to which these writings respond, and shows Derrida developing a sinuous critical path between conflicting conceptions. Perhaps the most illuminating of these analyses is the critical reading of essays collected in *L'Écriture et la différence*. Here, Baring takes the stance of the editor of a critical edition, and confronts different published versions of the essays, as well as hand-corrected manuscripts, to reveal key stages in the evolving notion of *différance*. Using Derrida's own deconstructive approach to key texts, he shows the radical incompleteness of the arguments, deftly exemplifying the processes by which he not only resists closure but also demonstrates its impossibility.

Derrida's questioning of the methods of history has limited his appeal to historians in France and internationally. For example, he lays down an epistemological challenge by insisting that documents should not only be tied to their contexts, much less their origins, but must also be read as 'texts,' with all the complexity and intertextuality that entails. This textualisation of history calls into question the position of those who read and write it and introduces a radical undecidability to historical interpretation. His reflections on the concept of the Archive have also questioned the approach of archivists and records managers to the custody of Memory.[2] Nevertheless, the extent of Derrida's impact on academic thought in the humanities makes him a suitable case for treatment by an intellectual historian. Edward Baring approaches him in this light, reading his works as both texts and documents, and illuminating their relationship to a complex intellectual context.

The Young Derrida is an exemplary work of intellectual history which effectively situates philosophical ideas in their intellectual context. However, it stops short of offering a full cultural history that would situate ideas in their political, social and cultural context. The reader will look in vain for references to wider cultural movements in literature, the arts or the visual media, and will find that there is only a light evocation of political and religious debates, the wars, political conflicts or economic peaks and troughs that shook France over the quarter century. Baring is not at ease with these wider contexts, which also occasion the few errors of detail. For example, Emmanuel Mounier was not the editor of *Esprit* in the late fifties, since he died in 1950, and Guy Mollet was not a member of the Radical Party when his government collapsed, but was a lifelong socialist (both p. 261). In fact, this lack does not significantly undermine Baring's account since Derrida had little direct involvement with politics. The events of 1968 caught him and many others off guard, but did not materially inflect his writings. It would therefore be a tortuous undertaking to depict these and other political events as an active context, since they leave so little trace in Derrida's *oeuvre*.

Baring's work is a full and satisfying account of Derrida's early development, set clearly in his intellectual context, Baring carefully avoids reducing the complexity of his positions, but locates him precisely in the institutional context of education at the *lycée* Louis-le-Grand, the Sorbonne and the *École normale supérieure*. He paints a convincing picture of how his work was shaped by the intellectual context, and how in due course he in turn helped to shape the intellectual world in which he lived. In the process, Baring uses Derrida as a window into a unique and mesmerising world of intellectual and social encounter, where the tides of debate intersect with the elective affinities of extraordinary individuals. The reader is thereby inducted into the intellectual powerhouse of Paris in the fifties and sixties, and is left with a sense of the subtlety and intensity of this incubator of ideas that have fascinated the world.

NOTES

[1] Jacques Derrida, *L'Écriture et la différence* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967); *La Voix et le phénomène* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1967; and *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967).

[2] Derrida, *Mal d'Archive: une impression freudienne* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1995).

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