

From Just Reading to Reading Justly Esther Peeren

What struck me when reading Derrida's "The Ends of Man" was how much of it is about reading. Starting from a pointed remark about "the reading or the nonreading of Heidegger" in post-war France, which is seen to raise the question of "what was at stake in reading or not reading him in this way" (115), and culminating in the most substantive section of the text titled "Reading Us," what it means to read others and ourselves in the right way - attentively, accountably, comprehensively, fairly, ethically (but, at the same time, critically) - is, I want to suggest, central to Derrida's text. In this short position paper, I will try to outline, first, what kind of reading is endorsed in "The Ends of Man" and, second, how Wynter's "The Ceremony Found" complements Derrida's account of reading while barely mentioning the word.¹

My discussion of reading in Derrida and Wynter unfolds against the background of the recent turn in literary studies away from close reading - equated (wrongly, I would say) with symptomatic reading as a "mode of interpretation that assumes that a text's truest meaning lies in what it does not say, describes textual surfaces as superfluous, and seeks to unmask hidden meanings" (Best and Marcus 1) - and towards surface, descriptive or just reading, where "just" is used in the sense of "only" rather than "righteous" (Best and Marcus; Love; Marcus, Love and Best).² This turn, which accuses readings that go "deep" of wrongheadedly positioning the critic as a political activist and literature as potentially emancipatory, has been seen to herald a "new modesty" on the part of the literary critic, who, apparently, is rendered more realistic, responsible and potentially even more ethical by remaining on the surface and reading literally (Williams).³ Best and Marcus, in their programmatic and polemical "Surface Reading: An Introduction," explicitly herald the "embrace of the surface" as "an affective and ethical stance" that "involves accepting texts, deferring to them instead of mastering or using them as objects" (10). This ascribes to symptomatic or deep readings a colonizing mindset acting in bad faith. Derrida and Wynter, I now want to show, point to the danger of embracing the surface when this means

¹ In her long text, Wynter refers to reading and re-reading only in relation to Fanon's reading of an ethnographic study of the so-called "Pygmy" population (197), Hyers's re-reading of Priestly's version of the Genesis narrative (207), her own reading of the Rastafari cosmogony (208) and Gallop's *Reading Lacan* (212, n. 33).

² It should be noted that Love's proposal for a descriptive reading (which mobilizes observational methods from the social sciences, most notably the work of Erving Goffman) is more nuanced than Best and Marcus's plea for surface reading. At the same time, I find Love's example, in "Close but not Deep," of what a descriptive reading of a literary text would look like, using a passage from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, disappointing and unconvincing.

³ For a trenchant Marxist critique of surface reading that questions any absolute distinction of surface and depth, see Baskin. The similarly absolute distinction between literal and non-literal meaning that Best and Marcus hold to when they propose to "take texts at face value" and to let "ghosts be ghosts, instead of saying what they are ghosts of" (13, emphasis in text) is equally problematic: language is inherently code rather than just word, and a ghost is, per definition and quite literally, the return of something other than what it is now.

discounting metaphoricity and consequently missing certain dimensions of the text,⁴ or accepting the construed opacities that keep humanism in its current non-ecumenical form globally dominant as actually impenetrable and thus unchallengeable, set in stone and flesh.

For Derrida, in "The Ends of Man," nonreading - which refers both to not reading at all and to reading "poorly" (119) - is clearly blameworthy yet also to an extent excusable, at least when it can be attributed to certain works not having been accessible to a particular audience completely or for long. Thus, he acknowledges that *Sein und Zeit* was "the only partially known work of Heidegger's at the time" (115) and that Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit* "had only been read for a short time in France" (117). As the text progresses, Derrida outlines the harmful consequences of the "'first reading' of Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger" (a reading, as the quotation marks signal, not first in time but first in space), which led French post-war readers - and even some contemporary with Derrida - to miss the critique of anthropologism present in these philosophers' work (119). Derrida's own readings are corrective, designed to highlight the "confusion" (120) and "falsification" (124) that enabled "the Hegelian, Husserlian, and Heideggerian critiques or *de-limitations* of metaphysical humanism appear to belong to the very sphere of that which they criticize or delimit" (119). There is in this a sense of mastering the text, but by carefully distilling what it says in a way that remains accountable to the text rather than by reducing it to an object and imposing meaning on it.

Reading Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger properly entails "taking into account" (a phrase that returns multiple times) how reading appears in their texts - in Heidegger's case, how the meaning of being is read from (*abgelesen*) certain entities who "interrogate themselves about the meaning of being" (125-126). For Derrida, this constitutes a "protocol of reading" that I, as a non-philosopher, had great difficulty making sense of, but that seems to propose (and I stand ready to be corrected during the workshop) that taking Dasein as a question to be read (or even reread) and realizing that this reading (or rereading) is "a hermeneutics of unveiling or of development" (126) is what ultimately reveals "that Dasein, though *not* man, is nevertheless *nothing other* than man" (127) and makes Heidegger's text participate in the "destruction of metaphysical humanism" (134). In addition, Derrida's reading of Heidegger draws attention to "the dominance of an entire metaphoric of proximity," which would be misread if seen as "an insignificant rhetoric" (130). In insisting that "Being, which is nothing, is not a being, cannot be said, cannot say itself, except in the ontic metaphor" (131) and that Heidegger is not truly read (fully, fairly, justly, responsibly) unless "the prevalence given to the *phenomenological* metaphor" (132) is noted and taken into account, Derrida advocates a reading that does not remain on the surface, at the level of the literal, obvious or, as Wynter puts it, the lawlikely, for it is precisely at this level that human and man, in "the language of the West" (Derrida 133), appear essentially the same.

⁴ Significantly, these dimensions are not the gaps Best and Marcus accuse symptomatic readers of searching for and reading too much into, but rather presences or abundances, such as "all the varieties of *phainesthai*, of shining, lighting, clearing, *Lichtung*, etc." (Derrida 132). Hence, I would argue that Derrida's mode of reading is more horizontally than vertically expansive (wide or lateral more than deep).

Yet, towards the end of his text, Derrida also warns that the strategy of “using against the edifice the instruments or stones available in the house, that is, equally, in language” means that “one risks ceaselessly confirming, consolidating, *relifting* (*relever*), at an always more certain depth, that which one allegedly deconstructs. The continuous process of making explicit, moving towards an opening, risks sinking into the autism of the closure” (135). Here, deconstructing, which requires an attentive reading beyond the level of the literal may also more deeply embed that which it seeks to dislodge or make tremble. This, however, is no reason not to deconstruct in this manner or in the manner of placing oneself outside, which carries its own risks; what is needed, according to Derrida, is “a new way of writing” that combines these deconstructive modes (135). Here, reading is replaced by writing, but “The Ends of Man” has made it very clear that this new writing is predicated on an ethics of reading that posits it as attentive, accountable and moving beyond the literal and below or laterally across the surface.

While reading is only mentioned a few times in Wynter’s manifesto “A Ceremony Found,” her account of the “fictively constructed and performatively enacted different *kinds of being human*” (196, n. 20) is all about trying to make these genres readable (and, consequently, rewritable) to those who enact them, to whom they normally remain opaque because acknowledging their fictiveness would cause “*entropic disintegration*” (227). The problem Wynter identifies is precisely one of nonreading, of not “correctly identifying” narration as narration (216): instead of factual, the world as we see it and ourselves in it, is narrative and fictive, yet it does not appear to us as something that requires to be read at all, let alone to be read beyond the surface. In fact, we ourselves deliberately construct it as something that does not need to and cannot be read but is instead self-evident and incontestable: “each respective fictive *We* can normally never know its no less, always-already cosmogonically chartered order of social reality and/or autopoetic living system *outside* the *genre*-specific perceptual categorization system or mode of knowledge production that each societal order needs for its own enactment and stable replication as such a reality” (238). That we cannot “normally” know our reality outside of the specific way in which we narratively constitute it, or even see that it is narratively constituted, does not mean that we can never do so, as “*that which we have made we can unmake and consciously now remake*” (242). But this requires that we read opacity, a reading that can only be a penetrating, piercing (and painful) one as reading opacity (rendering it legible as a construction) requires repudiating the imperviousness of the “nothing to see here” that it shows us.

At the level of the literal or descriptive, which is designed to blind us to it, the way in which mankind - within the “neo-Liberal-monohumanist *genre* of being hybridly human *Man(2)*” (222) - is “*rhetorically overrepresented as if it were that of humankind*” (216) remains inaccessible. For Wynter, much like for Derrida, working with(in) language, exploiting its depth and width (its capacity for metaphor and metonymy), is key to render this overrepresentation accessible as an overrepresentation that produces seemingly “*naturally dysselected Others*” and to make it possible for those Others to challenge it. Thus, one of the tools of Wynter’s proposed “*Autopoetic Turn/Overtun*” is semantic inversion practiced from a “‘gaze from below’ perspective” as in Bob Marley’s song lyrics, which have to be read beyond the literal to reveal the Rastafarian “*counter-cosmogony*” (207). Aimé Césaire’s “new science”

likewise proceeds through “an original handling of the word” that is not immediately obvious but requires study (209) and is therefore a “science of the *Word-as-the-code*” (244), where the word is never simply what it seems, and where the flesh, in turn, becomes legible as “*code-made-flesh*” (245). Neither Derrida nor Wynter, therefore, advocates “just reading” in Best and Marcus’s sense, precisely because they are interested in reading justly, righteously, for something (ultimately, a better, more just world) that will not come about if texts – including the narratives we spin about ourselves – are simply accepted and deferred to at face value (especially when the face, as Fanon shows, is itself already not what it seems).

Works Cited

- Baskin, Jason M. “Soft Eyes: Marxism, Surface, and Depth.” *Mediations: Journal of the Marxist Reading Group* 28.2 (2015).
- Best, Stephen, and Sharon Marcus. “Surface reading: An introduction.” *Representations* 108.1 (2009): 1-21.
- Love, Heather. “Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn.” *New Literary History* 41.2 (2010): 371-391
- Marcus, Sharon, Heather Love and Stephen Best. “Building a Better Description.” *Representations* 135.1 (2016): 1-21.
- Williams, Jeffrey J. “The New Modesty in Literary Criticism,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 5 January 2015. <http://chronicle.com/article/The-New-Modesty-in-Literary/150993/>.