de Ragland, bien qu'il ait visé «l'éclectisme», sur ce point Descartes n'a abouti, tout au plus, qu'au «syncrétisme» (pour employer les termes de l'*Encyclopédie*). À cause de la doctrine de la création des vérités éternelles, la position finale de Descartes manque d'harmonie; elle est trop bigarrée, voire incohérente. Ragland laisse au lecteur décider s'il s'agit d'un défaut irréparable.

Bien organisée et soigneusement argumentée, l'étude de Ragland donne naissance à bien des questions sur lesquelles les lecteurs devront se prononcer. Par exemple : les propos de Descartes sur la volonté et la liberté équivalent-ils à un «minimalisme» (ainsi que le soutient Thomas Lennon dans ses articles sur Descartes) ou à une théorie complexe? Si l'on choisit le minimalisme, qu'en est-il de la multitude d'opinions que Descartes emprunte à ses prédécesseurs et maintient avoir réconciliées? Et si l'on opte pour la complexité, à quel degré cette complexité provient-elle d'une intention expresse et tant soit peu accomplie de Descartes plutôt que d'un schéma interprétatif imposé sur le texte cartésien? À quel point doit-on renoncer à amonceler distinction sur distinction et nuance sur nuance pour enfin conclure s'être heurté aux limites de la position cartésienne? Seuls les lecteurs en seront juges.

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Politics of Deconstruction: A New Introduction to Jacques Derrida (POD)

SUSAN LÜDEMANN, TRANSLATED BY ERIK BUTLER

Stanford. Stanford University Press. 2014. 176 pp. $21.95.

Derrida: A Biography (DAB)

BENOIT PEETERS, TRANSLATED BY ANDREW BROWN

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... *Why is writing violent?* Or, to phrase the question differently: "What links," Jacques Derrida asks in "The Writing Lesson," his critique of Claude Lévi-Strauss' ethnographic parable of teaching the Nambikwara 'writing' in *Tristes Tropiques*, "writing to violence?" This disturbing question broods over Derrida's early texts "in tones of a violence repressed or deferred, a violence sometimes veiled, but always repressive and heavy." And this sub-textual violence—the violence of 'writing'—sometimes surfaces even in those superficially *theoretical* texts, like, say, "*Différance*," that appear distant from the directly *political* critique of 'ethnocentrism,' 'phonocentrism,' and 'logocentrism' in *Of Grammatology*. Considering its critical importance to the politics of deconstruction, then, it might appear urgent for the critic

to answer Derrida's question: "What can a relationship to writing signify in these diverse instances of violence?"[1]

But although Susan Lüdemann's *Politics of Deconstruction: A New Introduction to Jacques Derrida,* provides a stimulating and incisive introduction to the theory and practice of deconstruction, it's something of a disappointment that she does not directly confront this question. Nor does she confront the sometimes violent political controversies surrounding the deconstructive project, which have arisen from the exposure of Martin Heidegger's membership in the Nazi Party, of Paul de Man's writing of allegedly anti-Semitic articles for the Belgian newspaper, *Le Soir* (DAB 379-401), or from Derrida's own political background. Instead, in the chapter, "Deconstruction in America/America in Deconstruction" (POD 114-119), Lüdemann falls back upon the vague assertion of a connection between 'American deconstruction,' and the anti-Vietnam protest movement, the civil rights movement, and the currently fashionable multiculturalism, which connection is, regrettably, not supported by the evidence. "Deconstruction in America," in fact, was promoted by an elite group of Ivy League professors, including de Man, Geoffrey Hartmann, and Harold Bloom, who can hardly be seen as champions of the 'liberal-leftist' cause. And as for Derrida's own political dossier, the facts are briefly as follows:

Jacques ('Jackie') Derrida (1930-2004) grew up in a French émigré (*pied noir*) family of Algerian Jews during World War II, when the Vichy collaborationist government's anti-Semitic legislation resulted in his expulsion from public school, a childhood trauma which, along with "the threats and blows aimed at 'the dirty Jew,'" caused a "wound" which "never healed," and which he "would henceforth have to carry" for his entire life (DAB 16-21; esp. 19-20).[2] In the early 1950s, Derrida emigrated to France (DAB 35-58), where he became part of Parisian *avant garde* circles, and entered the *École Normale Supérieure* (ENS) (DAB 59-79), where he became a protégé of the Stalinist Marxist theorist, Louis Althusser (DAB 144-154). But at the ENS, he also began his study of the German phenomenologists, Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger[3] ('The Three H's'), in association with the French Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Lévinas, who exerted a strong influence on his thought (DAB 137-140). He also served a brief stint in the French Army, as a teacher at the *École Militaire Préparatoire* during the Algerian Revolution, when, his wife Marguerite remembers, "it was a real war" (DAB 92-112; 93). In this political context, Derrida's early texts, from *Writing and Difference* onward, appear to explicitly critique the Marxist-inflected structuralism of Althusser, Lévi-Strauss, and Lacan, and were therefore regarded with suspicion by the Stalinist and Maoist students of the ENS, whom Derrida accused of "'intellectual terrorism'" (DAB 150-154; 150).

But Derrida also became associated with the May '68 student revolt (DAB 196-199), which, along with the contemporary American anti-Vietnam and civil rights protests, are specifically referenced in his essay, "The Ends of Man." Derrida's perspective, however, is closer to the Nietzschean, 'right-wing,' 'anti-humanist' position of the *nouveaux*

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1 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 101, 107. See also Derrida, "*Différance*," 22.

2 Derrida, "Abraham, the Other," in *Judeities*, 10.

3 "I was a student at the *École Normale,*" Derrida says, "[when] I heard Heidegger's voice for the first time" (DAB 75).

philosophes like Michel Foucault (another of Derrida's teachers), than to the vaguely 'radical-leftist' stance of the student leaders like Bernard-Henri Lévy, André Glücksmann, or Daniel Cohn-Bendit.[4] To Derrida's credit, he never compromised himself by joining a fashionable political movement, whether the 'New Left' or the 'New Right,' but his early texts still exhibit a certain crypto-political mystique, a superficial *faux radicalisme*, suggested by his employment of vaguely sinister, dangerous, and exciting terms like 'the violence of the letter,' 'the dangerous supplement,' '*différance,*' 'writing' (*l'écriture*), and so on, whose actual political significance remains finally ambiguous or indefinable.

The profoundly ambivalent status of this sub-textual violence—the violence of 'writing'—in Derrida's early texts is thus attributable to its associations with Stalinist Soviet Communism (Althusser) and German National Socialism (Heidegger), with the Nazi Holocaust or Jewish Shoah (*via* Derrida's 'Judeity'), with the Parisian student radicalism of May '68, and with the Third World decolonization movements in Algeria and Vietnam, which French intellectuals, following Jean-Paul Sartre, felt compelled to support, even when the distinction between revolutionary violence and state terrorism became 'undecideable,' and national liberation became counter-revolutionary reaction, as in the Iranian Revolution of the 1980s. Further, despite Derrida's professed commitment to 'the deconstruction of metaphysics,' the constellation of 'writing,' 'difference,' and 'violence,' finally becomes, in his early texts, a *metaphysics of violence*, predicated upon a sub-textual 'play of forces' or 'play of differences,' an 'arche-trace structure' or 'arche-writing' of sub-liminal violence(s), which are never directly 'present' in the superficial text, but only become *visible* and *legible* through the practice of 'writing' and 'reading' that is the deconstructive method. But the precise political implications of that deconstructive method still remain ambiguous and elusive.

But "[b]eginning in the 1980s," Lüdemann observes, "Derrida devoted himself more and more … to political and ethical theories," with the "essay, 'Force of Law: The Mystical Foundations of Authority' (1990) … mark[ing] a turning point insofar as … the undeconstructibility of justice … stands at issue" (POD 58). But still, if the first part of this essay asserts the 'indeconstructibility' of 'justice' against the sub-textual violence of 'the sovereign law,' the second part, devoted to a reading of Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" *with* and *against* Carl Schmitt's contemporary texts, instead demonstrates the profoundly ambivalent status of that sub-textual violence within 'the sovereign law,' which sub-textual violence deconstructs 'the mystical foundations of authority' upon which the sovereignty of both democratic and totalitarian regimes is based (POD 70-72). This disturbing ambivalence also haunts Derrida's contribution to *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, "Auto-Immunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides," in which the horrific terrorist violence of the September 11th attacks is set against the West's reactionary counter-terrorist violence, which work against each other, resulting in a perpetually escalating cycle of proliferating terrorist violence(s). This self-perpetuating cycle of counter-terrorist and terrorist violences, in which the violence of counter-terrorism recoils against itself to create further terrorist violence, is metaphorically described, in Derridean terms, as an "autoimmunitary process[,] … that strange behavior where[by] a living being, in quasi-*suicidal* fashion, 'itself' works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself against its 'own' immunity."[5]

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[4] Derrida, "The Ends of Man," 111-114, 133-136.

[5] Derrida, "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides," 94.

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In Derrida's later texts, then, it becomes almost impossible for the philosopher or the politician—that is, the critic, the writer, or the reader of 'texts'—to escape a certain 'complicity'—the "complicity between all these discourses and the worst" (POD 71)— in this profoundly subversive violence, which is virtually omnipresent in the subconscious subtext from which 'writing' and *'différance'* are engendered, and which subtends both philosophy and politics. And still, Derrida concludes: "That is why, in this unleashing of violences without name, if I had to take one of two sides … I would take the side of the camp that … by right of law, leaves a perspective open to … democracy, international law, international institutions, and so on"[6]: a 'decision' which is, however, finally 'undecideable,' if not 'insupportable,' by a politics of deconstruction.

It's disappointing, given the perilous stakes involved in this 'critique of violence' in the contemporary international 'war on terror,' that Susan Lüdemann doesn't tackle the profound 'undecideability' within the political subtext of Derrida's posthumous *corpus*, but instead takes refuge in Derrida's vaguely defined 'hope' for 'a democracy to come,' which still, by his admission, never actually *arrives* …[7] But it's a relief that Benoît Peeters' *Derrida: A Biography* has actually arrived in time that the politically concerned critic can supplement the blank spots in Lüdemann's largely theoretical critique with reference to the specifically *political* context(s) from which Derrida's texts emerge, as *philosophical* responses to the perhaps unsolvable problem of the secret complicity between writing and violence.

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[6] Ibid., 113-114.

[7] "'Democracy to come' does not mean a future democracy that will someday be 'present.' Democracy will never exist in the present; it is not presentable"; *op. cit.,*120; 130.

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