

A COMMITMENT TO IRRESPONSIBILITY: ON DERRIDA'S *PASSIONS*: 'AN OBLIQUE OFFERING'

Johan de Jong

Leiden University, The Netherlands

Abstract. In accounts of deconstruction's concern with responsibility, what is often overlooked is its commitment to specific forms of irresponsibility as not just unavoidable but necessary. This article traces that necessity, through a reading of Derrida's "Passions: 'An Oblique Offering'", in the logics governing invitation, hospitality, and literature, and how this irresponsibility is expressed performatively in the "oblique" character of Derrida's textual experimentation. I argue for this irresponsibility as not destructively opposed to responsibility but as part and parcel of deconstruction's ethical commitment. This irresponsibility distinguishes deconstructive ethics not just from the relativism long ascribed to 'postmodernism', but also from an ethics of responsibility of a Levinasian type. Finally, I argue for this commitment to irresponsibility against contemporary criticisms that deem deconstruction symptomatic of a 1990's-style ironizing that one supposedly can no longer afford, given the challenges of today.

Keywords: Derrida; Irresponsibility; Responsibility; Deconstruction; Commitment

When I was asked, for a symposium on the legacy of deconstruction,¹ to choose one of Derrida's texts which I believe still yields important insights today, I could have chosen many. But I quickly and without much hesitation settled on "Passions: 'An Oblique Offering'".² First published in 1992, in the essay-collection *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, it is a text written by Derrida, but the title was not his. Perhaps fittingly, this is a text written under the title of another. The title was itself offered rather obliquely to Derrida by David Wood, who edited this collection of essays and commentaries on Derrida's writings, and invited the man himself to contribute by writing a text under this title. That essay collection is not unlike the symposium that I presented at, or the present special issue of *Filosofiya*: collecting a number of very different readers, voices, perspectives around the focal point of "Derrida".

Initially, "Passions" is about what it means for said focal point, Derrida himself, to respond to this invitation. If we imagine that Derrida had been invited to contribute to the present special issue, his text would surely not have been merely one

among others. Or worse: what if somehow it were! This would be seriously disappointing, and more than a little rude on his part. It seems that his contribution could only not disappoint if it were somehow disruptive of the proceedings, which would paradoxically mean that only a disruption of our expectations would be in line with our expectations. For Derrida, this in fact expresses something important about the general logic of any invitation.

This logic of invitation is the first thing I wish to highlight from “Passions”. The text describes how responding to any invitation involves an experience of the impossible. It is always unclear what it would mean to respond well. What Derrida works out here, with characteristic virtuosity, has become more famous through his later deconstruction of hospitality in *Of Hospitality*. The logic is very similar, forcing the one who responds into a specific type of double movement. On the one hand: we necessarily, and justly (I stress this), foreclose the alterity of other. That is, in the case of hospitality: justice demands that we come to know the stranger; which means discriminating, engaging them necessarily through existing categories, recognizing them, interrogating them, gauging their threat or promise, and so on. In a similar way, for any invitation, we must investigate for what we are invited, what is asked of us, to what ritual rules we are supposed to conform and what given expectations we are asked to meet, etc. On the other hand, we can only do this by presupposing some unconditional openness to the other that already exceeds those discriminatory and necessarily appropriating gestures. In the case of an invitation: any meaningful response to an invitation requires that we exceed merely prescribed ritual. Sticking merely to prescribed duties is not only impolite, but it would in fact be – just as much as throwing all said expectations and duties to the wind – irresponsible. Hospitality and invitation demand the impossible negotiation of these two movements. The same can be said of any situation of inheritance, as worked out by Derrida in *Specters of Marx*, as the “*injunction to reaffirm by choosing*” – to critically sift through a legacy that is never fully transparent and thus can only be a legacy insofar as it both calls for as well as defies interpretation, or: “around a secret” (Derrida 1994, p. 18ff.).

Although these logics are quite well-known, the discussion of the invitation in “Passions” allows Derrida to place an emphasis that is less obvious in the discussion of hospitality. Not just that one must also always discriminate, that justice also demands negation of the alterity of the other, but also that it belongs to the unconditional hospitality of any invitation that the invitation be open in a way that is highly paradoxical: an invitation is pressed upon the invitee, is urgent, but in such a way that the invitee is left absolutely free in their choice of response (otherwise the invitation would be coercion). In other words: any ‘proper’ response to an invitation (if there could ever be one) must include that it may be refused. This is even more emphatically so when it concerns a friendly invitation, and “Passions” also repeats Derrida’s beautiful definition of friendship, devel-

oped more fully in *The Politics of Friendship*, as the strange duty to go beyond duty (Derrida 1995, p. 7ff.).

All responsibility must thus contain an element of irresponsibility. This, however, not in the sense that one must be able to stay mute (as if non-response were not itself also a response!), but in the precise sense that the 'right' or 'correct' mode of response to anything (even if that could be clear, which would require knowing the context to an impossible degree) would itself still be irresponsible, would merely be conforming to already existing expectation, rule or ritual, thus relegating responsibility to prescribed duty.

If I emphasize this, it is because a reading of a certain Levinasian type was for a long time dominant in ascertaining the value and ethics of deconstruction. This reading runs two risks: first, that unconditional openness and hospitality to the other is ultimately privileged over what is in fact the equally indispensable discriminatory and appropriating movement. Second: that this privileging happens in the name of the Levinasian primacy of the ethical over the ontological, such that, ultimately, responsibility itself becomes the name, the hyper-value with which philosophy justifies itself. In a certain interpretation, this could lead to the idea that deconstruction is the responsible way of negotiating philosophical questions. At its worst, this would suggest that 'doing deconstruction' is the way to be responsible or to take one's intellectual responsibility.

"Passions" counters this with rare force, in a style that I take to be prototypically Derridean: no philosophy, including deconstruction, can justify itself with reference to its *being* responsible, to its *having taken* its responsibility, even as some kind of meta-virtue. It is precisely the seeking of such justification (traditionally in the domain of ethics) that constitutes for Derrida the metaphysical desire for purity or for "rigorous non-contamination" (Derrida 1991, p. 10); the desire to escape the aporetic strictures that any instance of decision places upon us; to have a decision be made for you by being exonerated through some principle, distinction, criterion, value or what have you, that would itself be unproblematic and that would determine the right way to proceed.

This leads Derrida to one of my favorite passages of the text, which I cite here, urging readers to read the two pages leading up to it:

[...] let it not be said too precipitately that these questions or these propositions [by Derrida or of deconstruction, JdJ] are *already* inspired by a concern that could by right be called ethical, moral, responsible, etc. For sure, in saying that [...], one gives ammunition to the officials of anti-deconstruction, but all in all isn't that preferable to the constitution of a consensual euphoria or, worse, a community of complacent deconstructionists, reassured and reconciled with the world in ethical certainty, good conscience, satisfaction of service rendered, and the consciousness of duty accomplished (or, more heroically still, yet to be accomplished)? (Derrida 1995, p. 17)

So, whatever happens today, whether in symposia or in special journal-issues reflecting on deconstruction's contemporary significance – in any case and for goodness' sake, do not let such a community be formed!

What I came to admire over the years about Derrida's texts is this critical eschewing of reassurance and good conscience, of moral superiority and self-justification. This belongs to the specific type of performativity or reflexivity that is characteristic of his texts (with 'reflexivity' I resort to a term Derrida avoided – because there is for him insufficient stability and determinability of the purported 'self' to which a reflexive would return). In the 1960's, this started as a problem of language, of which Derrida wrote in the opening lines of *Of Grammatology* that the problem of language "has never been simply one problem among others" (Derrida 1997, p. 6). His subsequent extensive textual experimentation – often dazzling; the very source of inspiration for his admirers and the very fuel for his detractors, and what "Passions" itself attempts to thematize under the heading of the "oblique" – was the result of the question: what language could explicate the inherent limits of language? These limits are now well-known: that communication is ill-conceived as 'transport' of a meaning that would 'arrive'; that all language – including that of deconstruction – involves binary hierarchies that produce "supplementary" effects, and so on. So, what language or mode of thinking or writing could itself explicate such limits while taking them into account? But also, beyond the language of limits, given the open character of meaning, what new and surprising forms of language, text and writing could better articulate and explicate the concepts, questions and problems at hand? In "Passions", Derrida repeats forcefully that there was no 'ethical turn' in the 1980's and '90's, warning against what he calls the "remoralization of deconstruction" (Derrida 1995, p. 15). And I agree: the early work on language indeed is already a performative attempt to do justice to the matter at hand in a way that precedes Derrida's specific later (seemingly more explicitly 'ethical') conceptions of the relation between deconstruction and justice. That is: by reflexively taking its own irreducible complicity into account (here: the complicity between the constatively stated limits of language, and the very language that explicates them).³

It is this reflexive or performative eschewing of the final word, the final justification, the pure distinction, even for the discourse that states this – that lends Derrida's texts their characteristic *obliqueness*: a certain lack of determinate directedness; an errancy (Derrida 1997, p. 162ff.) or "destinnerant indirection" (Derrida 1995, p. 24) that is at play as soon as there is any trace anywhere; a structural lack of definite arrival.

The classical term for this type of text might be the essay, except that the open search of the classical essay is typically bound together by a "topic". What binds or drives Derrida's texts seems to be neither a given topic, nor some determinate ultimate philosophical value like responsibility, but rather

his specific type of engagement or commitment that is always reflexively split between its unconditional stakes on the one hand, and on the other hand the limitations of the conditional language with which those stakes can only be engaged. This split and always partly irresponsible commitment is what drives deconstruction. Derrida has named it commitment, engagement, pledge, promise, acquiescence, double 'yes'. This split and at least double commitment is always primary in the sense that there is no further 'what' that grounds it. In "Passions", Derrida calls this lack of further specification of what drives this irresponsible-responsibility: the "secret". That one can never guarantee where and how this commitment arrives, or that this commitment of deconstruction will result in what is responsible, just, right, good or moral – that is not just a risk to be avoided. I would say that this is a risk to be *cultivated*. That is how I see philosophy, and that is one area where I see deconstruction being important today.

This makes Derrida's texts fundamentally *unsettling*, a core value of his work. That is not a pessimism. Yes, all unsettling opens up the space of all the anxieties of vulnerability, as well as those of surprise, promise, revolution. As is well-known, for Derrida this does not preclude decision but enables it or rather makes any decision an experience of the impossible (Derrida 2002), and on this point I follow Derrida pretty much to the letter. What it does, is transform the structure of negotiation, away from the desire for being in the right.

Confusing these two happens not only in the old allegations of the so-called relativism and nihilism of 'post-modernism'. The objection is making a comeback today in a new culture war: a new generation holding that only the relative ideological, economic and political stability of the 1990's could *afford* itself all this oblique indirection. For them, citing the well-known big issues of today (climate change, the rise of right-wing populism, the demands for social justice), you are always in a trench, make sure to pick the right one before anything else. All the rest is "both-sides-ism". I see the guiding impulse of that thought, not as progressive but as pre-deconstructive, working from the false opposition between the responsibility for taking up a position, and the unavoidable element of irresponsibility contained in all philosophical commitment.

Let me end with a final thought on this point. "Passions" ends as a text on literature. Derrida explicitly does not define literature, but points out an aspect of it, that I think is also essential to philosophy. Literature is that strange and precious phenomenon of having institutionalized an absolute space for irresponsibility. Because it is a space in which one may go anywhere, ungoverned by pre-direction, responsibility, purpose, value, etc. Literature, writes Derrida, is the modern institutionalization of "the right to say anything". He writes:

But this authorization to say everything paradoxically makes the author an author who is not responsible to anyone, not even to himself, for whatever the persons or the characters of his works, thus of what he is supposed to have written himself, say and do, for example. And these “voices” speak, allow or make to come – even in literatures without persons and without characters. This authorization to say everything (which goes together with democracy, as the apparent hyper-responsibility of a “subject”) acknowledges a right to absolute nonresponse, just where there can be no question of responding, of being able to or having to respond (Derrida 1995, p. 28 – 29).

All censorship jeopardizes democracy; they go hand in hand, violating the right to non-response in holding authors to account. Yet, to institutionalize is to establish a field. However, clearly this field is not overseeable, because the borders of this field of absolute non-response, are as porous as any other. This is evident, for example, in how our commitment or engagement in both reading and writing (its reasons, value, and effects) infiltrate our lives and the world – how “these ‘voices’ speak, allow or make to come” – in ways that clearly overflow that purportedly autonomous domain. As the (ir)responsibility of literature comes to depend on its right to non-response, its “right to keep a secret” (Derrida 2024, p. 50) – as the author is never to be blamed for its undeniable effects – literature becomes at once “the most innocent thing there is” as well as “the most unbearably criminal thing there is in the history of writing” (Derrida 2024, p. 112n1); “at once infinitely perverse and innocent” (Derrida 2014, p. 24).⁴

This does not mean that this field of autonomous non-response cannot or should not be institutionalized. It means that the *right* to the oblique and the irresponsible can itself never be securely established, its existence never taken for granted. All borders are active negotiations, thus always already crossed. It is for the protection of this right to nonresponse, this irresponsibility, whether as ‘literature’ or as ‘philosophy’, that I would actively fight tooth and nail, and will do so as a pressing matter “today”. I pledge to take that decision each time. Such would be my testimony, my pledge that cannot grant itself authority without some measure of violence. Because the value of testimony will never be reconciled “with that of knowledge or of certainty – it is impossible and it ought not to be done” (Derrida 1995, p. 31), I will not pretend that for answering the question “but why do *that*?” I have recourse to some over-arching value or claim to responsibility. Even though I may and should always be held to account for these decisions, that account must at a point run up against a certain acknowledgement of justificatory vulnerability that takes precedence over the re-instrumentalization or remoralization of this irresponsibility. For the latter would mean filling in, through the back-door, the very thing that literature (and, for me, philosophy) are actively fighting to hold open. As far as naming what, if anything, would be active behind that action, that secret in whose place it works, Derrida suggests: perhaps, passion.

NOTES

1. The symposium in question, where I first read this text, was *(Re)reading Derrida: A Library to Come*, held October 31st 2024 at the University of Amsterdam. I wish to thank the organizers, Marie-Aude Baronian and Joost de Bloois, for the opportunity to speak there, especially because my first real sustained engagement with Derrida's texts was in a seminar taught by Marie-Aude, which turned out to be a foundational experience in ways I could not have foreseen at the time.
2. First published in the 1992 the essay-collection *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, edited by David Wood, "Passions: 'An Oblique Offering'" was later reproduced in *On the Name*. Page-numbers in this article refer to that edition.
3. For the irreducibility of complicity, cf. Derrida 1991, p. 40ff. For a further elaboration of my account of deconstruction as ethics of complicity, see De Jong 2024 and 2020.
4. Quotes from Derrida's recently published 1991-1992 seminar *Répondre – du secret* (Derrida 2024) are my translations. Before 2024, one session of the seminar was published in (Derrida 2014). Taught in the period in which "Passions" was written, this seminar contains Derrida's most in-depth elaboration of literature's (ir)responsibility.

REFERENCES

- DERRIDA, J., 1991. *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*. Translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. ISBN 0-226-14319-8.
- DERRIDA, J., 1994. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. New York and London: Routledge. ISBN 0-415-91045-5.
- DERRIDA, J., 1995. Passions: 'An Oblique Offering.' In: *On the Name*, edited by Thomas Dutoit, translated by David Wood, John P. Leavey, jr., and Ian McLeod, pp. 3 – 35. Stanford: Stanford University Press. ISBN 0-8047-2555-1.
- DERRIDA, J., 1997. *Of Grammatology*. Corrected edition. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. ISBN 0-8018-5830-5.
- DERRIDA, J., 2002. Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority.' In: *Acts of Religion*, edited by Gil Anidjar, pp. 228 – 98. London and New York: Routledge. ISBN 0-415-92401-4.
- DERRIDA, J., 2014. Responding To/Answering For: The Secret (SECOND SESSION, NOVEMBER 27, 1991). *Yale French Studies*, no. 125/126, pp. 7 – 29. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24643636>.
- DERRIDA, J., 2024. *Répondre – du secret. Séminaire (1991-1992). Secret et témoignage. Volume I*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil. ISBN 978-2-02-153485-6.

- JONG, J. de, 2020. *The Movement of Showing: Indirect Method, Critique, and Responsibility in Derrida, Hegel, and Heidegger*. Albany: State University of New York Press. ISBN 978-1438476087.
- JONG, J. de, 2024. Deconstruction as Ethics without Result: On Derridean Resultlessness, Urgency, and Attunement in Contrast to Arendt, Sextus, and Kierkegaard. *Angelaki*, vol. 29, no. 1 – 2, pp. 275 – 89. doi:10.1080/0969725X.2024.2322300.

✉ **Dr. Johan de Jong, Assist. Prof.**
ORCID iD: 0000-0002-5121-1348
Universiteit Leiden
P.J. Veth kamer 2.22
1 – 3, Nonnensteeg
2311 VJ Leiden
The Netherlands
E-mail: j.e.de.jong@phil.leidenuniv.nl